



C. L. 29.



Class No. .... 5.2 .....

Book No. ....

Acc. No. 1854 .....



E22 N

11

# The Secret of the Plateau

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "Captain Starlight"  
"The Riddle of the Air" &c.

*Illustrated by W. Edward Wigfull*

GIRLS CO.

1864

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED  
LONDON AND GLASGOW

W51 S

## By Percy F. Westerman

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>The White Arab.</b>                   | <b>Rocks Ahead!</b>                        |
| <b>The Buccaneers of Boya.</b>           | <b>King for a Month.</b>                   |
| <b>Rounding up the Raider.</b>           | <b>The Disappearing Dhow.</b>              |
| <b>Captain Fosdyke's Gold.</b>           | <b>The Luck of the "Golden Dawn".</b>      |
| <b>In Defiance of the Ban.</b>           | <b>The Salving of the "Fusi Yama".</b>     |
| <b>Captain Sang.</b>                     | <b>Winning his Wings.</b>                  |
| <b>The Senior Cadet.</b>                 | <b>A Lively Bit of the Front.</b>          |
| <b>The Amir's Ruby.</b>                  | <b>A Cadet of the Mercantile Marine.</b>   |
| <b>The Secret of the Plateau.</b>        | <b>The Good Ship "Golden Effort".</b>      |
| <b>Leslie Dexter, Cadet.</b>             | <b>East in the "Golden Gain".</b>          |
| <b>All Hands to the Boats.</b>           | <b>The Quest of the "Golden Hope".</b>     |
| <b>A Mystery of the Broads.</b>          | <b>Sea Scouts Abroad.</b>                  |
| <b>Rivals of the Reef.</b>               | <b>Sea Scouts Up-Channel.</b>              |
| <b>A Shanghai Adventure.</b>             | <b>The Wireless Officer.</b>               |
| <b>Pat Stobart in the "Golden Dawn".</b> | <b>A Lad of Grit.</b>                      |
| <b>The Junior Cadet.</b>                 | <b>The Submarine Hunters.</b>              |
| <b>Captain Starlight.</b>                | <b>Sea Scouts All.</b>                     |
| <b>The Sea-Girt Fortress.</b>            | <b>The Thick of the Fray at Zeebrugge.</b> |
| <b>On the Wings of the Wind.</b>         | <b>A Sub and a Submarine.</b>              |
| <b>Captain Blundell's Treasure.</b>      | <b>Under the White Ensign.</b>             |
| <b>The Third Officer.</b>                | <b>The Fight for Constantinople.</b>       |
| <b>Unconquered Wings.</b>                | <b>With Beatty off Jutland.</b>            |
| <b>The Riddle of the Air.</b>            | <b>The Dispatch Riders.</b>                |
| <b>Chums of the "Golden Vanity".</b>     |  |
| <b>Clipped Wings.</b>                    |  |

1864

# Contents

---

CHAP.		Page
I.	PETER PRESTON'S INVITATION	9
II.	TOMAYN'S PROJECT -	18
III.	THE TRIAL TRIP -	26
IV.	CAPTAIN STARLIGHT	34
V.	OFF! -	41
VI.	THE STOWAWAY	50
VII.	A CALL FOR AID	57
VIII.	To THE RESCUE	66
IX.	IN TOW	77
X.	THE SANDSTORM	85
XI.	THE HORRORS OF THE NIGHT	93
XII.	BATTLING THROUGH	109
XIII.	FAILURE	115
XIV.	THE SECOND ATTEMPT	129
XV.	"THREE FOR LUCK"	139
XVI.	THE LAND OF FIRE	145
XVII.	A WARM RECEPTION	156
XVIII.	A SPOKE IN VON MÜLLER'S WHEEL -	167
XIX.	A QUESTION OF LONGITUDE	174
XX.	VON MÜLLER'S REVENGE -	184

# Contents

CHAP.						Page
XXI.	THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE AIR	-	-	-	-	191
XXII.	THE NIGHT ATTACK	-	-	-	-	198
XXIII.	TOMAYN THE MAN!	-	-	-	-	206
XXIV.	THE RETURN	-	-	-	-	218

# Illustrations

---

	Facing Page
"STICK IT, LADS!"	<i>Frontispiece</i>
WHERE THE BEDOUINS WERE THICKEST	64
GREEK FIRE!	160
TOMAYN DID NOT WAIT FOR THE ATTACK	208



# THE SECRET OF THE PLATEAU

---

## CHAPTER I

### Peter Preston's Invitation

"What do you think of her now, James, old thing?" inquired Air Commander Peter Preston of the *Black Comet* Aerial Flotilla.

The old thing, otherwise James Barr, was old only on account of his flying experience. In point of age he was seventeen years and eleven months; and, possessing a first-class pilot's certificate, had been offered the post of second in command of the new airship *Explorer*.

The two chums had just completed a tour of one of the group of hangars that had been constructed to accommodate the popular commercial airships owned by the *Black Comet* Company, Limited.

"Great!" exclaimed Barr. "But—"

"But what?" prompted his friend, noticing the latter's hesitation. "Get it off your chest."

"I'm not keen on those exterior propellers," explained Barr. "The motive power is the same—radio

## 10      The Secret of the Plateau

electricity collected and transmitted through turbines—but why this departure? The original *Black Comets* with a central tunnel housing a shaft of turbine blades never let us down, did they? Then why these eight propellers?"

He indicated those propellers which the bulk of the *Explorer* and the relatively confined space of the hangar made it possible to see. They were built out of the side of the metal envelope by means of A-brackets, and somewhat resembled those of the huge airships constructed by the British Government in 1929. But not quite. Instead of the motors and propellers being slung on the under side of the envelope, the propellers—the motors being inside the hull—projected from the *Explorer's* sides at points only a few feet below her maximum horizontal plane.

"They are vulnerable gadgets, I admit," explained Preston. "But these are placed there with a definite object, ease of manœuvring. Our standard airships, improved *Black Comets*, have a very high speed, but their turning circle is enormous. You don't remember the difficulty we had when we took the AU445 in tow. You weren't there. But you do know the lash-up we made of things when we first tried to approach Ni Tolu."

"That was because the radio current failed," said Barr.

"Quite; but we couldn't back away from the place. We've got a job on compared with which Ni Tolu is a mere picnic."

"What's that?" asked Barr eagerly.

"One thing at a time, James," protested his future commanding officer laughingly. "These propellers are designed to give maximum efficiency either ahead or astern. With the starboard propellers working full ahead and the port ones full astern the airship will turn in her own length. And she must be capable of floating on the surface of the sea without having her propellers submerged."

"What's the idea?" asked his chum. "Why should the *Explorer* want to come down on the jolly old briny? Personally, I don't mind, but when all's said and done an airship's an airship, or it should be, and a sea-going ship's a very different thing. What's this latest stunt you're hinting at?"

Peter took his chum's arm.

"We've seen all we have to see here for the present," he observed. "Let's go to my office and I'll explain."

Together they crossed the spacious landing-ground past the row of hangars, each on a huge turntable and at a sufficient distance from its neighbour to allow an airship to be housed independently, whatever the direction of the wind might be.

There were mooring-masts too; but these were unoccupied. One or two unfortunate experiences when airships had been torn away during a gale had resulted in an order being given that these mooring-masts were to be used only as temporary measures when an airship was about to start or had just arrived, and then only when the wind had a velocity of less than thirty miles an hour. Otherwise all the vessels of the fleet were

housed in very strongly constructed hangars, the approaches to which were uninfluenced by even the fiercest gales.

The company also possessed similarly equipped landing-grounds at each of the principal towns in their far-reaching routes, together with emergency shelters so placed that no airship of the *Black Comet* Aerial Flotilla would be more than five hundred miles away from a hangar while voyaging from Great Britain to any of the British dominions except Canada and Newfoundland. An airship overtaken by a gale in the Atlantic would either have to battle with it—the question of lack of fuel did not arise—or else, in the unlikely event of mechanical trouble, would have to make for the nearest air station under her lee.

So far there had been no instance of a *Black Comet* passenger-carrying airship having to take the latter alternative. The company's trans-Atlantic liners had been flying so regularly, swiftly, and safely that in consequence there was a serious falling off in the receipts of the steamship companies operating across the herring pond. That was only as far as passenger receipts were concerned. Air liners were not constructed for the transport of merchandise in bulk, and only baggage and articles of a light character and of more than ordinary value were permitted to be taken by air.

Peter Preston's private room was in the block of buildings forming the company's flying-ground offices. Here the bulk of the organization was carried out, the

London offices having only a small staff to deal with inquiries and the issue of tickets.

The room was well but plainly furnished. There was a large table, half a dozen comfortable chairs, a bookcase containing works of a technical and informative nature. Against one wall was an indicator synchronizing with the principal one in the directors' room. This gave the direction and force of the wind, the barometric and thermometric readings at any point of the various routes operated by the airship fleet. There was a telephone connected with every building in the establishment. By means of it Preston could be "put on to" the radio telephony room and thence get in touch with any airship operated by the company and with most of those owned by other concerns.

"Sit down, my festive," invited Preston. "Here's a map of Central Africa. That's new ground to you, isn't it? See that red line drawn from Lagos to Port Sudan?"

"Yes," replied Barr. "That's not one of our routes, is it?"

"It will be, for once at least," continued Peter. "And I'm the fortunate one told off to open it out. I want you too, old son. Now, follow the line to where it crosses from French territory into the Sudan. Wadai's French and Darfur's British. In the latter territory is a collection of hovels—it's hardly worth calling a town—named Fasher. Due north of that, and where that bearing crosses the red line shown on the map, is what?"

14      The Secret of the Plateau

"A blank, according to the map."

"Exactly, and it's that blank we have to explore. So far it's a blind spot, if an area of several hundred square miles can be termed a spot. At least half a dozen airmen have attempted to survey the district and every one has failed; not one has returned to tell the tale. For some reason, and there's something mysterious about it, an aeroplane hasn't been able to cross the plateau. Perhaps there's some peculiarity of the highly rarefied air, but honestly I don't know. British and French airmen have been instructed by their respective governments to avoid the district. You can see the routes followed by Royal Air Force machines between Nigeria and the Sudan. Either they pass well to the north or to the south of the proscribed area. So we're going to try our luck with a lighter-than-air craft."

"Why?" asked Barr.

"Because I have to obey orders," replied Preston. "And I'm looking to you to back me up."

"Yes; but what's the idea?"

"Ah! There you are! Why exactly I don't know, but apparently it's to be a sort of scientific discovery expedition. The *Explorer* has been chartered for three months by a Mr. Henry Tomayn——"

"Sounds poisonous, that," interrupted the irrepressible Barr.

"Discipline, my lad! Discipline! He's your employer—or will be."

"I'm employed by the *Black Comet* Company."

apparently without the faintest reason, he would break into a violent outburst of temper.

He was rich—painfully so—and hardly ever let an opportunity slip to impress his listeners with the fact. How he made his money was a different proposition. On that subject he kept a discreet silence; with the usual result that people who would otherwise have accepted him at his face value were more than curious to discover his antecedents and how he became rich. What they could not discover with certainty they invented—to Henry Tomayn's detriment.

They could not, however, deny that Henry Tomayn was now a fully-fledged naturalized Englishman, and in a position to make full use of the privileges that every member of the British Empire can enjoy.

"Good morning, young man," began the charterer of the *Explorer*, when Peter Preston had introduced his second in command. "We shall see much of each other during the coming expedition. Your colleague, Captain Preston, has given me details of your career. You have been round the world by air, I understand?"

"No, sir," replied Barr. "Half-way round and then back."

Tomayn laughed.

"You are discriminating, I observe. Had Captain Starlight returned across South America from the Pacific he would have been the first to circumnavigate the world by air, and you would have been one of his companions in that honour."

20      The Secret of the Plateau

"But the German airship *Count Zeppelin* did that some time ago," remarked Preston.

Tomayn shook a podgy forefinger.

"Ah, no!" he objected. "How can anyone truly claim to go round the world by airship who never went south of the Equator? A similar claim might be upheld if an airship started from somewhere within the Arctic Circle and returned to her place of departure without having gone south of that circle. No! Until an airship leaves a certain air-port and proceeds to a spot on the opposite side of this globe of ours, and then proceeds until she returns to her starting-point, not until then will man be able to claim with truth to have flown round the world. But you've had plenty of air experience in spite of your youth, Mr. Barr?"

"I believe I have, sir," admitted Jimmy Barr.

"And before I have realized my ambition you will have acquired very much more," continued Mr. Tomayn. "If this expedition proves successful then one of the secrets that have puzzled scientists for centuries past will be solved. It is my belief that the unexplored territory, known to the Arabs as 'The Heights guarded by Black Magic', is populated by the descendants of an ancient civilization. I hope it will not be the Lost Tribes we'll find there; but the descendants of the Lost Legion. You've heard of the Lost Legion, Mr. Barr? Good! Now, Captain, you are responsible for the equipment: what about arms and ammunition?"

"There are rifles, shot-guns, and ammunition provided, sir," replied Preston.

"But no machine-guns?"

Preston shook his head.

"There's no reason for them," he declared.

"Is there not?" interrupted Tomayn sharply. "Make no error, my friend. For ordinary flying over recognized routes perhaps no! But for our expedition they will be necessary."

"Necessary?"

Tomayn shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, then let us say that they are desirable for intimidation."

Peter was not impressed.

"You are presuming that the inhabitants will not welcome us, sir," he remarked. "Force of arms is rather out-of-date. Explorers employ milder methods with greater prospects of success."

"Look here, Captain!" exclaimed Tomayn. "When you went with Captain Starlight to the Pacific didn't the Captain have to use firearms?"

"Good gracious, no!" replied Preston. "Once there was trouble. Things looked a bit black, but the trouble wasn't caused by Captain Starlight. He settled it all right. He went ashore, unarmed and holding up an olive branch."

"He was asking for trouble," remarked Tomayn, with the suspicion of a sneer.

"But he gained his point," rejoined Peter promptly. "He's my pattern, sir; and if we do find ourselves up against the inhabitants of this unknown land, I'll do my best to put Captain Starlight's methods into practice."

22      The Secret of the Plateau

Tomayn made no observation to the remark, but suggested that they should inspect the interior of the new airship.

Accompanied by Preston and Barr he made a lengthy tour, paying considerable attention to the various novelties embodied in the construction, asking innumerable questions and expressing satisfaction with all he saw.

"What do you think of him?" asked Barr, when the charterer had "taken off" in his private airplane to his palatial home on the outskirts of Leatherhead.

"One should not criticize his employer," rejoined Preston.

Barr shook his head impatiently.

"I told you before he's not our employer, old son," he protested. "Between chums and not as between skipper and subordinate, what's your opinion?"

"What's yours?" asked Preston.

"Bit of an outsider," declared Barr. "He'll land us in a hole if we aren't careful."

"But we are going to be careful," said his chum resolutely. "There'll be plenty of adventure coming our way without asking for trouble. Now, how about choosing our crew?"

"All Scouts?"

"Or ex-Scouts. Yes, certainly. Captain Starlight has given me a free hand in the matter, and we can't do better than that. Where's the register? Over there, on that shelf. Do you mind handing it down?"

It did not take Preston and his Chief Officer long

to make the selection. The *Black Comet* Company had a staff of nearly two hundred tried airmen, of whom nearly a half were "standing by". In other words, they were employed at the principal flying-ground on technical and ground duties on the understanding that they could be called upon to man an airship at a day's notice.

Against each man's name were given particulars of his age, experience, ability, and character; although thanks to the care taken in selecting their employees, the company had obtained men of good character. Many of the "men" were still in their teens, but they were men for all that. It was recognized that theirs was a young man's job, in which rapid thinking, activity, alertness, and discipline were essential qualifications.

In all sixteen "hands" were chosen for the *Explorer's* complement, including Radcliff, Dyson, and Sinclair, who had taken part in the rescue of the crew of the lost *Black Comet I.*

Their names were posted on the notice board, and a notification sent to each of the selected men. If anyone did not wish to "sign on" he had but to state his objections. If these were valid the man was excused and another taken in his place.

Next morning every notice had been returned initialled by the man to whom it was addressed. No one wished to back out.

"That's splendid!" declared Barr, when Captain Preston told him of the unanimous decision.

"Yes," agreed Peter. "But I've put my foot into

it this time. There's a radio just been received from Old Mackie. He's peeved."

He handed the page from the signal pad to his companion.

"As your oldest chum in aviation, why wasn't I asked to go with you in *Explorer*? Think it over. Any old job will do.' "

"He has a prior claim," said Barr, without hesitation. "As he says, he's your chief pal. I'll ask for a transfer, only I'll be horribly disappointed."

Peter Preston, though torn by the conflicting claims of his chums, came to a quick decision.

Hugh Mackie was, as he had reminded him, Peter's particular chum. The two had been kidnapped by Captain Starlight as the *Black Comet* was about to start for the Antipodes. That was when Captain Starlight had to fly secretly and before he had given his valuable discovery to the British nation. Peter and Hugh, thanks to their courage, resourcefulness, adaptability, and training as Scouts, had proved themselves so valuable as airmen that when *Black Comet II* started on a voyage to rescue the crew of her wrecked predecessor, the two chums were amongst the first to be chosen by Captain Starlight for that hazardous adventure.

Mackie, now only twenty years of age, was in command of one of the airships flying regularly between Great Britain and Australia. In less than two years after joining the then newly-formed *Black Comet* Aerial Flotilla, he had risen to the position of com-

mander of one of the air-liners. He had promptly grasped his opportunity when the radio-actuated air-ships revolutionized lighter-than-air craft. Incidentally he was immensely popular with the passengers, a fact that, at sea as well as in the air, goes a long way towards a successful career.

And yet Hugh Mackie was desperately anxious to be included in the complement of the *Explorer* and to serve in any subordinate capacity, in order to be with his chum Peter Preston.

"Quixotic old bean!" thought Peter. "Dashed if I'll let him play Jonathan to my David." Then aloud: "It can't be done, Barr. I've asked you to come along, so you jolly well stop. Where's that signal-pad? Thanks. You might telephone through and find out where *Black Comet IX* is."

Barr did so. The reply from the information bureau came through promptly:

"*Black Comet IX*, position at 10 a.m. is 400 miles north by west of Madeira, homeward bound."

"Then Hugh will be back before sunset to-morrow," remarked Peter. "All right: I'll tell him it can't be done, thanks all the same."

Preston wrote out a lengthy reply which, by means of the company's private code, was condensed into fifteen words. This he dispatched to the radio officer for transmission to his old chum.

Acc. No.: 1864.

## CHAPTER III

### The Trial Trip

On the following day the *Explorer* left her hangar for final tests before setting out on her adventurous voyage into the unknown.

It was a proud moment for Peter Preston when he found himself in sole command of the airship. She was by no means a mammoth, although she was considerably larger than the original *Black Comet*. The latter had been constructed with a view to being able to shelter in unorthodox sheds. Captain Starlight was apt to declare that she could almost adapt herself to a drain-pipe. Actually, circumstances had once compelled this airship to hide in one of the tunnels of the Grand Union Canal.

It was no longer necessary to limit the airship's beam to a mere fifteen feet. The *Explorer* had a beam of nearly fifty feet, roughly one-sixth of her extreme length. Thanks to the lifting powers of Crophelium gas, which has the additional advantage of being absolutely non-inflammable, the *Explorer* had a "lift" equal to that of a hydrogen-filled airship of fifteen or twenty times her gas-containing capacity. Crew, stores, water-ballast, dynamos—all were contained within the

rigid metal envelope, the only exterior fittings being the eight propellers, with their A-brackets and driving chains, and the horizontal and vertical rudders.

There was little or no wind that morning. Four men only were required to walk the *Explorer* from her hangar, although there were plenty of hands available if necessary. It was one of Preston's ideas to restrict the number of groundsmen to the lowest possible figure, since in the wilds of Central Africa landing and taking-off would have to be carried out by the crew themselves.

"All clear, sir!"

The *Explorer*, held to the earth only by the weight of a ton of water ballast, quivered as the dynamos purred. Slowly the eight propellers revolved, but the airship made no forward movement.

"Start supplementary ballast tanks," ordered Peter.

Fore and aft streams of water gushed from the release valves. Gradually and majestically the *Explorer* rose in the air until she gained a height of five hundred feet.

Then: "Easy ahead—eight hundred revolutions!"

Soon the airship had worked up to seventy miles an hour. Within the hull there was nothing to give her crew the impression of speed, except the spectacle of her shadow travelling over the fields now eight thousand feet below. The radio-actuated motors were almost silent. Only the faint clatter of the well-oiled driving-chains served to remind them that there was machinery in motion. The blades of the propellers, although their whirr was plainly audible to people on the ground,

appeared to be working noiselessly, thanks to the thick unsplinterable glass windows. Practically vibrationless, rushing through the air at a rate exceeding that of an express train (although the motors were by no means "all out") the *Explorer* gave all on board a sense of absolute security.

"Now for the turning tests, James!" announced Preston. "We'll have to put her through a pretty stiff performance. It's better to discover weak spots, if any, now, than to find them when we're thousands of miles from the nearest air-station."

"That's so," agreed Barr. "No need to serve out parachutes, is there?"

Peter shook his head.

"If she buckles we'll be beyond the aid of parachutes or of any other human device," he replied. "But she won't. I'm keeping the vertical rudders rigid and trying the effect of full astern all starboard propellers."

He touched a switch that operated gongs in all habitable parts of the airship. This was the warning for all hands to guard against being hurled on their faces by the sudden alteration of direction.

Then, grasping the master-lever controlling the four starboard propellers, Preston jerked it into the astern position. It was a drastic experiment but it was justifiable.

The *Explorer* heeled quite thirty degrees on her major axis and continued at that angle while the port and starboard propellers were revolving in opposite

directions. Thousands of feet below the circular expanse of land appeared to be swinging like a gigantic turntable, while all around masses of detached fleecy clouds, glistening white in the sunlight, were virtually encircling the airship at a terrific speed. And yet, once the initial inertia was overcome, the only interior indication that the airship was turning almost in her own length was the fact that the needle of the steering-compass was making a complete revolution every fifteen seconds!

Then the starboard propellers were reversed and the port driven full ahead. Again came the brief disconcerting jerk and corresponding heel as the airship spun in the opposite direction.

"She's standing up to it beautifully," declared Barr.

"Couldn't be better," agreed Preston. "Right! Now three-quarter speed ahead port and starboard. Then we'll find whether the windage has wrecked the vertical rudders."

A series of tests revealed the fact that their relatively big surface had stood up to the work required of them. The airship, steered with all propellers running ahead, manœuvred perfectly.

During the trial flight various aircraft were sighted. Between Croydon and the French coast airplanes were, to quote Barr's words, as thick as a swarm of bees. Some had the heels of the *Explorer*, others she out-paced. Three airships of pre-*Black Comet* type were also encountered. Two tried in vain to keep up with her. She simply left them standing, notwithstanding

the fact that Preston resisted the temptation to "let her all out".

When within sight of Cap Barfleur the course of the *Explorer* was changed to due west. After about an hour's run in that direction Peter decided to make for home.

As the airship made a wide turn to starboard young Sinclair, who was acting as look-out man, reported another airship approaching bows-on.

"She's one of the *Black Comets*," he declared.

"Then we'll race her," rejoined Preston. "Who's in the wireless-room? Radcliff, eh? Well, ask him to call her up and find out what she is."

A quarter of an hour later Radcliff reported that he had been unable to receive any acknowledgment from the other airship.

"Either her wireless is out of order or the operator is jolly slack, sir," he opined.

By this time the other airship was rapidly overhauling the *Explorer*. She was now two miles or so astern, but the sunlight reflected from her varnished envelope made it impossible to distinguish the number on her bows.

"She's shifting, by Jove!" admitted Preston.

"Don't let her overtake us," implored Barr, but Preston again refused to go all out until the motors had been properly run-in.

"But we won't give her the satisfaction of running past us," he added. "I'll turn eight degrees to starboard and get away from her course."

As the *Explorer* turned and settled down on a sou'-easterly course the other airship cut across her stern at a distance of less than a mile. As she did so it was possible to read her identification marks.

"*Black Comet IX!*" exclaimed Preston and Barr simultaneously.

"And isn't Mackie making her shift," added the latter. "He's anxious to get home before you start."

"He'll find himself on the carpet if he isn't careful," observed Preston, although he was feeling highly gratified at the suggestion that Mackie was pushing on in order to see him before the great adventure began. "He's exceeding the speed limit. If the Air Ministry patrols spot him there'll be trouble, and so far Hugh has a 'clean' certificate."

At a leisurely speed the *Explorer* again headed for home. She was under orders for an eight-hours' test flight and it was important that she should not reach the air station before that time was up.

At exactly five o'clock the *Explorer* slowed down and turned head to wind over the flying-ground. Already *Black Comet IX* had landed her passengers and had been taken into her hangar. The ground staff, having accomplished that task, had grouped themselves in front of the shed from which the *Explorer* had emerged eight hours previously.

They—or the majority of them—were on duty merely in case of a mechanical breakdown, for the airship was about to be hauled into her shed by means of a powerful electro-magnet.

At about a hundred yards from the open doors of the hangar a slender pole, guyed by four ropes, rose to a height of eighty feet. At its upper extremity was the magnet, connected to a dynamo by means of flexible steel cables containing insulated copper wires.

It was Preston's task to bring the nose of the airship within ten feet of the magnet and electro-magnetism would do the rest.

On leaving the flying-ground the *Explorer* had shed a quantity of water ballast. To take this on board when at a height of a hundred feet or more was obviously out of the question; so gas had to be exhausted from several of the balloonets and stored under pressure in metal containers. This had the result of reducing the buoyancy of the airship to a little more than that of her own weight in air.

Nevertheless it tried Preston's coolness and judgment considerably to manœuvre the huge vessel into the right position. Conscious that he was being watched by hundreds of critical eyes he almost bungled through over-exertion.

The *Explorer*, losing way too quickly, began to drive away from the lofty magnet; while what was intended to be a slight "touch ahead" with the two foremost propellers, nearly sent the nose of the airship crashing into the gable-end of the hangar.

The next attempt was successful. With a gentle bump, like that of a skilfully-controlled locomotive engaging with the rest of the train, the steel nose-plate came in contact with the poles of the magnet. Short

of a failure of the electric current nothing could break the bond between the airship and the winding-engine. The *Explorer* was held in a grip calculated to withstand the fiercest onslaught of the winds.

Directly contact was established the light pole was lowered to the ground and the hauling down operation commenced.

In less than ten minutes the airship was safely housed without having wasted time in being secured to the mooring-mast.

Taking his log-book with him, for the various technical details written therein had to be submitted to the staff engineers as soon as possible, Preston descended the ladder to the floor of the hangar.

The first to greet him was his old chum Hugh Mackie.

"I'm coming with you!" declared Hugh, shaking Peter by the hand.

## CHAPTER IV

### Captain Starlight

"Good!" rejoined Peter cordially. "I'm just off to the office. Come along. I don't suppose I'll be there more than half an hour, and then I'm free till to-morrow morning. When are you due to start again?"

"My festive, you misunderstand me," protested Mackie. "When I said I was coming with you I implied that I should accompany you as one of the crew of the *Explorer*."

"You got my radio message?"

"I did!" admitted Hugh cheerfully.

"Then?"

"Have you never heard the anecdote of Nelson putting his telescope to his blind eye?" asked Mackie. "My dear old thing, admit that I've worked to wind'ard of you."

"You haven't, old son," said Peter. "I'm sorry, and all that sort of thing, but I'm not going to spoil your chances by letting you throw up command of *Black Comet IX*. 'Sides, I've chosen my crew."

"Then you aren't keen on my coming with you?"

"I won't say that," confessed Preston. "You know

perfectly well that, apart from Service considerations, I'd be frightfully keen to——”

“Good enough!” interrupted Mackie triumphantly. “I have got well to wind’ard of you, Peter. I don’t believe in holding on to the slack and letting the jolly little green blades shoot up under my beetle-squashers. So directly I landed I made tracks for the directors’ room and, luckily for me, Captain Starlight was there. I asked him to find me a berth in the *Explorer*. ”

“And then?”

“He ticked me off for a breach of discipline—making a verbal request instead of putting it on paper through the usual channels. I said I was sorry. Then he laughed and told me it would be all right and that I could go as supernumerary air pilot. So that’s that. You can’t go against the Chief’s orders, old thing. By the by, he wants to see you after you’ve sent in your report.”

“That alters the case,” agreed Peter. “I don’t mind telling you that I’m glad, fearfully bucked, about it. Who’s taking your place?”

“I don’t know for certain. Black, perhaps. He’s a smart pilot. So you’ve Jimmy Barr with you? Good! I’d like to meet him again.”

“You’ve narrowly missed doing so,” remarked Peter, as the chums made their way across the flying-ground amidst a running fire of congratulations to Preston on his successful trial trip. “He’s still on board seeing to things.”

It was considerably more than an hour before Peter

## 36 The Secret of the Plateau

Preston was able to leave the office of the Chief Engineer. There were innumerable questions to answer concerning the behaviour of the *Explorer* on her trials.

Then, accompanied by Mackie and Barr, Peter went to Captain Starlight's private room.

They found the famous airman studying a number of enlarged aerial photographs through a powerful magnifying glass.

Extending his hand, Captain Starlight greeted the lads warmly and asked Peter for details concerning the *Explorer's* flight.

"Your first voyage in her promises to be even more exciting than at first sight," he said. "You've seen copies of these photographs before, I think, Peter? Mr. Tomayn let me have these for examination. Between ourselves, I'd like to know how they came into his possession, since it seems rather extraordinary that a German should have given him important clues to one of the most sensational discoveries of modern times. However, let's hope that it's all open and above board; but that doesn't alter the fact that you have a rival airship—if not two—to compete with."

"That's good, sir!" exclaimed Preston.

"Is it?" rejoined Captain Starlight drily. "It remains to be proved. Apparently the situation is this: a Herr von Müller has just completed the construction of an aircraft that is part airship, part airplane. She's named *Vorwärts*, and von Müller has already obtained the Government's consent to allow her to pass over British territory in order to attempt a flight to Cape

Town and back. That may or may not be a blind; and I'll not be surprised if von Müller gets as far as your objective and when he's discovered what he's after he'll double back to Germany. So you'll be up against him, although it will be a spirit of friendly rivalry.

"Then a Frenchman has apparently got wind of our friend Tomayn's objective. A Count de Nonancourt has chartered the non-rigid airship *Jeanne d'Arc* for a voyage of discovery over the Sahara and French Equatorial Africa. That complicates matters, since a small portion of this unscaleable plateau"—Captain Starlight pointed to one of the photographs lying on his desk—"is technically within French colonial territory. You'll have to tread warily, Preston. One must do so if French susceptibilities are to be respected, and whatever else happens we don't want to cause any unpleasantness between our Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay, especially on account of a naturalized Englishman.

"And to complicate matters still further, there is the risk of von Müller and Count de Nonancourt coming to loggerheads. Mind you, I don't suggest that they'll be trying to smash one another's airships, but when an excitable Frenchman and a stolid pugnacious Teuton find themselves rivals in a territory far beyond the pale of civilization there's no saying what may happen. In that case Tomayn may prove himself a nuisance. Although he claims to be British by naturalization, one cannot forget that he has a

38      The Secret of the Plateau

German father and that he spent his youth in Germany."

"If Tomayn does cause trouble what ought I to do, sir?" asked Preston.

"Remember that you are British," replied Captain Starlight. "You have a duty to perform to your temporary employer, Tomayn; but you have a much higher one to your own country. Use tact, discretion, and, if necessary, firmness. Of course, there may not be trouble, but I think it only fair to you to put you on your guard. Apart from these considerations there is the question of your reception by the natives to be taken into account. You have a perilous task, I don't hesitate to admit; but from what I know of you, Peter, you have courage and you are fairly level-headed. That's one of the chief reasons why you were chosen to command the *Explorer*. And I don't think our confidence in you will be misplaced."

"I hope not, sir," replied Preston.

"Now, regarding your route," resumed Captain Starlight. "You will follow the usual air route across France, down the west coast of Italy, and thence over Malta. You will then make for Benghazi on the north coast of Africa and proceed coastwise to Alexandria. Thence up the Nile to Dongola, where you will shape a course over the desert to your objective, a distance of some seven hundred miles. Your greatest danger for that part of the voyage will be sandstorms. You remember our experience in the Mesopotamian desert?"

"Rather, sir!" agreed the three lads simultaneously.

"Then profit by the incident," continued Captain Starlight. "Then you'll have to climb a good eighteen thousand feet in order to pass over the western walls of the plateau. See, here is a photograph giving some idea of the stupendous heights. There are no gaps, you'll notice, nothing but an unbroken natural wall of granite. How the original inhabitants got there is a problem that requires considerable explanation."

"But where do these rivers flow into, sir?" asked Peter. "There are several streams and lakes. They must have an outlet somewhere."

"That will be your job as explorers to discover," replied Captain Starlight. "According to these photographs there does appear to be water. There must be, or animal life could not exist; but whether these supposed rivers are really waterways or merely narrow tracts of sand showing between foliage I cannot say. The camera does lie sometimes, you know. Take our Royal Air Force photographs of battle areas during the Great War; you see hundreds of beehive-like objects dotted everywhere. Actually they are shell craters, but owing to the shadows they appear to be convex and not concave. An aerial photograph is undoubtedly of the greatest assistance to the explorer, but details cannot always be accepted as being what they appear to be. Now your immediate task is to pilot the airship to the plateau. By the by, the Arab name for it is Zaghamedi, and you'd better refer to it as such in your reports. When you arrive there Mr. Tomayn will give you instructions, and, unless your

40      The Secret of the Plateau

discretion tells you otherwise, you are to carry out his orders. I'll put that in writing so that if occasion arises you will be in a position to assert your authority. That's all, I think. Now, you fellows, my car's outside. What do you say to a run up to town, dinner, and a show afterwards?"

## CHAPTER V

### Off!

"Mr. Tomayn's arrived, Peter," announced Barr. "He's brought a terrific amount of baggage and a smile like that of a seasick cat."

"Easy, old son," protested Preston.

"But I'm merely stating facts," asserted the *Explorer's* Chief Officer. "You'll see for yourself in half a tick."

It was the morning of the day fixed for the departure of the airship on her long voyage to Zaghamedi. The *Explorer* had been brought from her hangar and was moored on the taking-off ground. Since there was hardly any wind and the outlook was that of a continuance of mild settled weather, it was considered unnecessary to moor her to one of the masts. Although these mooring-masts were fitted with lifts they were not well adapted to handling stores and baggage, and whenever possible the staff of the air station preferred having departing airships anchored to the ground before commencing their flight.

Presently Mr. Henry Tomayn hove in sight. He was accompanied by Captain Starlight and other principal officials. In his wake were a dozen men engaged

42      The Secret of the Plateau

upon transporting his personal effects from the Customs shed to the airship.

Jimmy Barr's description of the *Explorer's* charterer was an apt one. Tomayn not only looked in a bad temper, but he was in one. Only that morning he had received information that the French airship *Jeanne d'Arc* was already on her way to Zaghamedi. Count de Nonancourt had stolen a march on his rival.

Nodding curtly to Commander Preston, who stood at the entry-port to receive his wealthy passenger, Tomayn asked to be shown to his state-room.

"You might come with me, Starlight," he added. "There are one or two matters—no, I shall not require you gentlemen," addressing the other officials. "That is to say, unless there is anything to delay our departure."

Somewhat to the surprise of Preston, Mackie, and Barr, Captain Starlight meekly followed Tomayn to the cabin allotted to him.

"He seems to have a pull over Captain Starlight," observed Barr.

"You wait," said Peter. "Captain Starlight isn't the one to knuckle under, especially to a fellow like that. You might see to the stowage of Mr. Tomayn's baggage, Barr. Thank goodness we aren't carrying more passengers."

Preston and Mackie were still standing by the entry-port when one of the Postal Service monoplanes alighted within fifty yards of the airship. From it descended a post office messenger.

"Cablegram for Tomayn, sir," he announced. "And I have the *Explorer's* mail."

"Very good," replied Preston, taking the proffered orange-coloured envelope. "I'll see that he gets it. Smith, you might take charge of the mail-bag and sort its contents as soon as possible."

The aerial postman touched his cap, turned, and ran back to his monoplane. He had to do a round of fifty miles, delivering correspondence or parcels to a dozen rural post offices before noon, and consequently he had little time to waste.

Presently Captain Starlight reappeared, followed by Mr. Tomayn. The latter was shaking with ill-concealed temper.

"Commander Preston," began Captain Starlight, in even tones, "I think I have already given you instructions concerning your duties in relation to the charterer of this airship. Unfortunately Mr. Tomayn seems to have an erroneous idea of the relations between the executive staff and himself. It is unfortunate, but until he has the grace to acknowledge his error the airship does not leave the ground."

"But haven't I chartered the airship?" protested Tomayn. "Technically she's mine."

"Quite so," agreed Captain Starlight suavely. "But only up to a certain point. Your safety and that of the airship and her officers and crew depends upon the skill and good judgment of her commander. He will endeavour to fall in with your wishes, but you must distinctly understand that he is in sole command and

is authorized to take such steps as are necessary for her good navigation and security. Until I receive your assurance the departure of the *Explorer* will be delayed."

"I'll cancel the charter, then," stormed Tomayn.

"That you are quite at liberty to do," replied Captain Starlight. "Your money, less incidental charges, will be returned on application at the office. Commander Preston, will you kindly give orders for Mr. Tomayn's luggage to be sent on shore."

At that Tomayn's angry manner underwent a complete change. Like most blusterers he collapsed like a punctured toy balloon when firmly handled.

"My error, Captain Starlight!" he exclaimed. "Or, perhaps, a slight misunderstanding on both sides. Yes, yes! I quite see your point now. I'll be quite willing to accept your terms."

"They are hardly terms," rejoined Captain Starlight. "Merely the usual regulations concerning the duties of commanding officers, you know."

"Then there'll be no further delay?"

"None. The airship is ready to take off. In another five minutes you'll be well away."

"Excuse me, Mr. Tomayn," announced Peter, "but a cablegram has just arrived for you."

The charterer ripped open the envelope and read its contents.

Then he began to stuff the paper into one of his pockets, changed his mind, and held it out for Captain Starlight to see.

"It's a message from that scoundrel von Müller,"

he declared. "Sent off when the *Vorwärts* was over Genoa: 'On my way to South Africa. I propose to remain a few days at Zaghamedi to greet you upon your arrival. Ludwig von Müller'. Like the Frenchman, he's stolen a march on me, and we are wasting time here."

"I fail to see why von Müller should be termed a scoundrel simply because he's got the wind'ard of you, Mr. Tomayn," remarked Captain Starlight calmly. "That's not sporting, you know."

"Sporting? Who said anything about sport?" asked Tomayn furiously. "If that square-headed German gets there first—"

"Captain Scott didn't rave when he found the Norwegian flag flying at the South Pole," remarked Starlight. "Englishmen—true-bred Englishmen—rather pride themselves on being good losers, you know. But you are anticipating defeat. You haven't taken into consideration the speed of the *Explorer*. Ask Commander Preston. Well, Preston, I'll take myself ashore. Cheerio! And you too, Mackie. The best of luck to you both. *Au revoir!*"

Two minutes later Preston in the navigation cabin sounded the "stand-by" gong. The huge propellers began to revolve. Additional gas was forced into the balloonets. The *Explorer* tugged and strained at her securing ropes.

"Let go!" megaphoned the foreman of the ground staff.

A dozen holding-down ropes were cast off simul-

## 46 The Secret of the Plateau

taneously. Leaping skywards the airship gained an altitude of five thousand feet before, under the increased revolutions of the radio-actuated propellers, she commenced to forge ahead.

"Will you take over, Mr. Barr," said the youthful commander. "Altitude 6000, course south 45 east, speed 1500 revolutions. That's all, I think, thank you."

Barr repeated his instructions, gave the necessary orders to the helmsman and motor engineers, and made the usual notes in the log.

Turning to Tomayn, who had been a silent yet interested spectator of the quiet deliberate way in which the airship had been settled on her course, Peter remarked cheerfully:

"She's all right for the present. Now, have you any idea of the speed of the *Vorwärts*?"

"They say she's capable of 120 miles an hour," answered Tomayn. "But that may be an underestimate given out to deceive us."

"And that of the *Jeanne d'Arc*?"

"On her trials she did more than a hundred miles per hour."

"Then I'll tell you what I propose doing," explained Preston, actuated by a desire to do his best for the charterer. "I'll send out the call signs of both those airships. They may answer: the chances are that they will. If they do I can tell where they are on a compass bearing from us. That, of course, won't give the distance. Two, or better, three bearings from other

airships would do that; but if we know the approximate course, provided it cuts the compass bearing at between  $45^{\circ}$  and  $135^{\circ}$ , we'll be able to have some idea where our rivals are, say within a couple of hundred miles."

"And then?" asked Tomayn eagerly.

"I can tell you whether the *Explorer* will win, independent of her handicap," rejoined Preston.

"That's very good of you," remarked Tomayn. "Naturally I am anxious. I hope you won't mind my asking questions?"

"Not at all," replied Peter. "That is, when I'm not busy with navigational duties."

"You bear heavy responsibilities," observed Tomayn, now apparently anxious to make amends for his former churlishness.

"We do," agreed Preston, speaking for the officers of the *Black Comet* fleet collectively. "So far we haven't had a single accident involving loss of life since the passenger service was inaugurated."

"Don't boast," said the charterer banteringly. "It's very unlucky; you must touch wood."

"I'm not boasting," declared the Commander quietly. "I'm merely stating hard facts; that's a very different proposition."

Tomayn moved to the observation window.

"Where are we now?" he inquired.

"Over Poole Harbour," replied Peter, indicating the land-locked sheet of water dotted with pine-clad islands and threaded by sinuous waterways between the mud-flats. "That's the Island of Purbeck ahead, only it

PLS  
G Acc 87 NAGAR

isn't an island really. We take our departure from St. Alban's Head. Well, Dyson?" he inquired, as the *Explorer's* senior wireless officer appeared in the doorway.

"I have got in touch with *Black Comet X*, sir," he announced. "She reports that the *Jeanne d'Arc* is bearing north 60 east of her position. She is now due east of Funchal."

"Thank you," replied Peter, and going to the chart table he busied himself with parallel ruler and dividers.

"I take it that the French airship is now approximately midway between the southern extremity of Sardinia and Tunis," he announced. "That means she's nine hundred and fifty miles ahead of us."

"Think we'll overhaul her?" asked Tomayn.

"With reasonable luck we'll win by a short head," declared Preston confidently.

"And the *Vorwärts*?"

"We don't know as yet. My wireless officer, Mr. Dyson, will report directly the information is forthcoming. As regards the *Jeanne d'Arc*, we're doing a good 180 miles an hour. At a moderate estimate we're exceeding her speed by sixty miles an hour."

"Can't we go faster?" asked Tomayn.

Preston shook his head. Although the *Explorer* could attain 230 miles per hour, he was not going to let her engines run all out at this stage of the voyage.

"We're dropping the Dorset coast astern," he remarked. "Perhaps you'd care to have a last look at Old England's shores for a while?"

"How can we see astern?" asked Tomayn.

In reply Peter turned a small brass wheel actuating the periscope, the top of which had hitherto been flush with the upper surface of the envelope.

"Steady on your horizontal rudders," he cautioned, addressing the helmsman.

The warning was a timely one, for as the periscope shaft emerged above the hull of the airship the terrific windage tended to lift her bows.

"There's nothing to be seen," complained Tomayn, peering into the object bowl of the periscope.

"Because the cabin is too well lighted," explained Preston. "I'll screen the side windows."

This he did. The hitherto dull white surface of the object bowl gave place to a clearly defined panoramic view of the coast from Portland Bill to the Needles. It was possible to focus a pair of binoculars upon the concave surface and enlarge the image, practically as in the case of direct telescopic observation.

Even as Tomayn watched, the vision faded before his eyes. So great was the speed of the airship that in a few seconds the coastline had vanished in the haze.

While Preston was engaged in removing the sliding shutters Hugh Mackie entered the observation cabin.

"I say, old man!" he whispered. "We've just discovered a stowaway."

## CHAPTER VI

### The Stowaway

"What's that?" demanded Tomayn, his sharp ears picking up the low-spoken words. "Stowaway? Who is he? What is he?"

"A lad of about fourteen," replied Mackie, none too pleased at Tomayn "butting in" upon a matter that must be dealt with by the Commanding Officer of the airship. "Will you see him in your cabin, Peter?"

"Right-o!" agreed Preston. "We'll go into the affair there. I'd like to have the facts before I see the youth. Excuse me, Mr. Tomayn."

The two chums made their way along the alleyway for a distance of about ten yards. On the left was a door bearing an aluminium plate with the word "Commander".

Peter pulled aside the sliding door.

"In you get, old son."

Even as Mackie stepped over the raised coaming Tomayn glided in as swiftly and as noiselessly as an eel. With the utmost self-assurance he seated himself in Peter's revolving chair and, holding the tips of his fingers together, smiled condescendingly upon the two young officers.

Resisting an impulse to request the charterer to make himself scarce, Peter seated himself on the edge of his desk and waved his chum to the only vacant chair.

"Proceed, counsel for the prosecution," he said.  
"Let's have the story."

"Sinclair found the lad stowed between a couple of packing-cases," began Mackie. "The kid told him he'd been on board since nine o'clock last night. He'd hidden in the hangar, and when the watchman went the round he'd taken the opportunity to slip through the open entry-port."

"What was his idea?"

"To go for an air-trip on the cheap, I expect."

"But did he know where we are bound for?"

Mackie shook his head.

"Probably he didn't bother about that. Sort of spirit of adventure, I should imagine."

"Confounded impudence on his part," interrupted Tomayn. "What punishment can be awarded to stowaways on aircraft? Can't they be dropped overboard?"

"By Article 18, sub-section 3, of the Regulations governing the Safety of Aircraft, a stowaway can be dropped overboard if the lives of the passengers and crew are endangered by the additional weight," replied Preston. "That only applies to airplanes and other heavier-than-air craft engaged upon trans-oceanic voyages and then only as a last resource."

"But surely in this case there must be some pro-

vision made for getting rid of the brat?" persisted the charterer. "Can't you drop him overboard with a parachute when we're over France?"

"We're over France already I see," rejoined Preston, glancing out of the scuttle. "But do you think it fair to condemn the lad before he's had a chance to speak for himself?"

"And pitch in some snivelling cock-and-bull yarn," continued Tomayn, with the suspicion of a sneer. "You'll have to drop him somewhere, Captain."

"Very well, then," declared Peter crisply, "I will. We'll descend at the flying-ground at Chalons and hand him over to our agents there."

"No, you don't!" protested Tomayn heatedly. "We're racing against time; every moment is precious if we are to overhaul the French airship. You told me that yourself. And goodness knows where the *Vorwärts* is now. A parachute's the thing. We can't be sentimental in this business."

It was then that Peter Preston reached the limit of his patience.

"I suggested a plan, Mr. Tomayn, and you turned it down. I did so simply because I thought that it would appeal to your sense of humanity. To drop the lad by means of a parachute would be a terrifying experience for him, even though that method of descent is perfectly safe. Might I remind you of Captain Starlight's declaration—one that you agreed to—that the handling of the *Explorer* was to be left to me? Also I would like to point out that this is my private cabin,

and as you were not invited to come here I must regard you as an intruder. Will you kindly leave, as Mr. Mackie and I have to go into a matter of discipline?"

"But——" began Tomayn.

Preston held up his hand, then going to the door he slid it open.

The man went out.

"Thank you!" said the Commander.

"Now," he continued briskly, after he had drawn the curtain over the closed door, "now we can get things done. I purposely made for my own cabin so that Tomayn wouldn't butt in."

"He did, the poisonous blighter!" exclaimed Hugh. "One would think he's bought the airship. Technically I suppose he has."

"No fear," replied his chum. "In point of fact the company has agreed, in consideration of a certain sum of money, to take Tomayn and his belongings to Zaghamedi and back. That doesn't mean that he has the run of the ship, although if he'd been a decent sort I should not have raised objections—rather the reverse. That's one objection to the passenger service; you have to put up with all sorts, good, bad, and indifferent. But forget him! Now, we'd better have the stowaway here."

Manipulating the dial of a telephone, Preston called up the steerage and asked that the stowaway should be brought to his cabin.

"We'll put the wind up the youngster and then let him down gently, Hugh," he declared. "Hang it all,

we can't altogether blame him for wanting adventure."

A few minutes later Sinclair arrived, followed by a little freckle-faced lad who, trying to overcome his fears, looked decidedly "cheeky".

"Well, my lad," began Preston. "What's your name?"

"Smith, sir, Tom Smith."

"Eh? Come, now; your real name?"

"It's what I said, sir," declared the lad, with obvious sincerity.

"Good: how old?"

"Thirteen."

"Unlucky number. Well, we'll see. Where's your home?"

"Nottingham, sir," and gave the number and name of the street.

The Commander made a note of the information.

"Now tell me: why did you stow yourself away?"

"I wanted to go to my uncle in Montreal, sir."

"Then all I can say is you've made a jolly big blunder, my lad. You won't see Montreal this trip."

Tommy Smith opened his eyes wide in perplexity. He had been quite under the impression that the airship was one of the *Black Comets* on the regular line to Canada.

"Where is it going, sir?" he inquired.

"She," corrected Peter. "Ships are always 'she's', no matter whether on or under the sea or in the air. We're bound for Zaghamedi. I suppose you have never heard of the place?"

"No, sir."

"You probably will soon know a jolly sight more about it than most fellows at home. Since we can't send you back you'll have to come with us across Africa."

The boy's eyes sparkled. Here was adventure with a vengeance. For the present he had lost all interest in his uncle at Montreal.

"That's champion, sir!"

"Is it?" rejoined Preston. "I don't know so much about that. You're a stowaway. You're putting the owners of the airship to considerable expense. We've the trouble of looking after you and feeding you—"

"But I've brought some food—two loaves and half a pound of chocolate."

"That might have lasted you across the Atlantic, but you'll be jolly hungry if that's all you get to eat. Then there's the gentleman who has chartered—hired—this airship. He's rather peeved about you. And I'll have to wireless your people: that costs half a crown a word. Now what about it? Your father will have a stiff bill to pay."

"I haven't a father, only mother, and she isn't well off."

"Pity you hadn't thought of her before you started on this mad business," said Peter severely.

It had been Tommy Smith's idea to join his well-to-do relation in Canada and get some sort of employment, so that he could help his widowed mother. Pride prevented him giving this explanation.

"You're a silly young ass!" declared Preston. "But I'm going to give you a chance. You'll have to work your passage, and if you give trouble you're for it—understand? Sinclair!"

"Sir?"

"Take Smith aft. Tell Mr. Barr that he's to be put in the starboard watch. You might see that he draws bedding, clothing, and cleaning truck and show him where he is to berth. That's all for the present."

As Alec Sinclair took the stowaway out of the cabin Dyson appeared.

"We've just received a radio reporting the *Vorwärts*, sir," he announced. "She passed over Cairo at noon, and reported defects in one of her starboard engines. She's asked permission to land at the Government aerodrome at Khartum to effect repairs."

"You might inform Mr. Tomayn, Dyson," said the Commander. "And then will you please send out this message to the Chief Constable of Nottingham. I shouldn't be surprised if the police have already been informed of young Smith's disappearance. They'll be able to let his mother know he's well, better than I can. Now, Hugh, old thing! What about lunch? I vote we have it here, and then we won't be bothered by—"

"The poisonous blighter!" concluded Mackie.

## CHAPTER VII

### A Call for Aid

The meal over, Preston went for'ard to relieve Barr in the navigation cabin. In the alley-way he encountered Tomayn who, mindful of his well-deserved "ticking off", was hanging about outside the control room. The hands of the Starboard Watch had just had dinner and were falling in ready to take over their various duties in the Afternoon Watch.

"That's good news of the *Vorwärts*, Captain!" exclaimed the charterer. "Engine trouble, eh? Well, let's hope she won't get going again until we're over Zaghamedi."

"Slight defects; she probably will," rejoined Peter.

"Hope she won't," snapped Tomayn. "And what about the stowaway?"

"Stowaway?" echoed Preston.

"Sure: that miserable little blighter you found on board. If he isn't a stowaway, what is he?"

"We haven't a stowaway on board," declared Peter.

"What? What have you done with him then?"

For answer, the Commander pointed to Tommy Smith, who, rigged out in a uniform that was certainly

## 58      The Secret of the Plateau

too large for him, had fallen in with the hands of the Starboard Watch.

"He's signed on as one of the crew," said Preston.

"I thought this was an airship, not a reformatory training school," sneered Tomayn.

Preston ignored the remark.

"We'll make a man of Tommy Smith yet," he said to himself. "That is more than you'll ever be, Mr. Tomayn."

Eight hours after leaving the aerodrome the *Explorer* was passing over Malta at an altitude of ten thousand feet: eight hours, and it was not so very long ago that eight days was considered a very fine performance for a liner to make the passage between London and Valetta.

It was now nearly sunset. The trio of rocky islands—Malta, Comino, and Gozo—were bathed in the almost horizontal rays of the setting sun that cast long shadows across the brown parched ground.

According to regulations the *Explorer* reported herself by radio to the wireless station at St. Elmo. Then, as the hour sounded, she also reported her position to her home station. Wherever she was aloft, even at the uttermost parts of the earth, that hourly declaration had to be made. Never, whilst in the air, was the airship out of touch with the head-quarters of the company that owned her. Possibly such a proceeding tended to kill romance, but it contributed enormously to the sense of comfort of the passengers and crew of each airship belonging to the *Black Comet* fleet.

"Reports sent and acknowledged, sir," reported Director Officer Dyson.

"Very good," replied Commander Preston. "See that they are entered in the log."

Standing at the large plate-glass observation window, with Mackie by his side, Preston watched the peculiar effects of the setting sun. Although he had seen many such sunsets, both in the tropics and in the temperate zones, the sight always fascinated him.

While the sun was still visible from the *Explorer* as an enormous red ball just on the point of cutting the line where sky and sea met, it had already set as far as earth-bound spectators were concerned. The Maltese Islands far below had apparently vanished in a vast and rapidly increasing pall of darkness as it pursued the disappearing sun. Lamps were beginning to twinkle far below. At a lesser altitude than that of the *Explorer*, airships, flying-boats, and airplanes were everywhere to be seen, each displaying her regulation navigation lamps, while in the case of the air-liners rows of well-lighted ports gave indications of the conditions of luxury and comfort enjoyed by those who elected to travel by these up-to-date greyhounds of the air.

Of recent years Malta had become one of the principal airways junctions of the Mediterranean, and thus had regained much of the prosperity she had lost when the British navy had been so drastically reduced that the Mediterranean Squadron had virtually ceased to exist. Even as Peter and his chum looked the hitherto

brilliantly-reflected envelope of the *Explorer* was plunged into darkness as the sun dipped with remarkable celerity beneath the horizon.

"On lights!" he ordered.

Once more Dyson appeared with a signal pad.

"*Vorwärts* is reported four hundred miles west of Assiut, sir," he announced. "She has encountered a severe sandstorm, and her remaining motors are out of action."

"Any SOS?"

"No, sir; Captain von Müller states that he is hoping for a westerly wind to drive the airship back to the Nile Valley, where he hopes to effect a landing."

"Tough fellow, von Müller!" exclaimed Preston.  
"Don't you think so, Hugh?"

"He's got grit, even though he's a bit too optimistic," replied Mackie. "Four hundred miles out of his course too. My word! He must have encountered some storm. His airship was limping towards Khartum, wasn't she?"

The two chums consulted a map of North Africa. According to the details given in the radio message, the *Vorwärts* was now well out across the Libyan Desert, and not far from the frontier between Egypt and that part of Northern Africa over which Italy claimed authority. She was approximately five hundred miles from the sea and almost that distance from the nearest town, which happened to be Wadi Halfa, on the borders of Sudan and Egypt.

"There's a Royal Air Force depot at Wadi Halfa, I believe," observed Mackie.

(Age V-1864)

"Yes, a squadron of bombers. If the *Vorwärts* has to come to earth wrecked these machines might be able to rescue her crew, supposing they are not done in by the natives, who have the reputation of being the most bloodthirsty denizens of the Libyan Desert," said Preston. "The India Air Mail airships daren't deviate to such a distance, and in any case they aren't allowed to attempt salvage. Barring us, there's not another airship likely to be in the vicinity."

"How about the *Jeanne d'Arc*?"

"Goodness knows where she is. We've had no report from her or of her since noon. Quite possibly de Nonancourt doesn't want his position to be known. Unless I'm mistaken, however, I think this is his route—Bona, Ghadames, Ghat, Bilma, and thence to Zaghamedi. He's practically over French territory the whole way."

"Then he's out of it as far as giving von Müller a hand is concerned," remarked Hugh.

"And so we must have a shot at it," ended Preston. "We'll make a bee-line for Wadi Halfa."

"Against your orders, eh? Weren't you told to coast to Alexandria and then make up the Nile Valley?"

"I was," agreed his chum. "But in cases such as this I have to use my own discretion. By the same saving clause I can tell Tomayn to go to blazes if he objects. As a matter of fact I shall say nothing to him about it."

Having worked out the revised course, Preston gave fresh instructions to the helmsman. This done

## 62 The Secret of the Plateau

he went to a belated meal with his chum Mackie.

But Peter Preston had underestimated Mr. Henry Tomayn's intelligence. The charterer was sitting reading in the lounge when, happening to look upwards, he noticed that the tell-tale compass indicated a change of direction.

He waited about five minutes. Perhaps, he argued with himself, the alteration of helm was on account of the *Explorer* having to avoid another aircraft. But, since in five minutes the airship had travelled fifteen miles or so, such an explanation did not satisfy him.

Tomayn made his way towards the navigation room. Outside the Commander's cabin he stopped and listened. He could hear Preston and Mackie conversing jovially.

"That young fool leaves too much for others to do," he soliloquized angrily.

He was tempted to beard the youthful skipper in his den and demand an explanation why the airship's course had been altered, but the notice written on the sliding door deterred him. To be asked to make himself scarce once was quite enough for one day.

On the threshold of the navigation room he paused to reconnoitre. It was now the Second Dog Watch. Barr was again on duty until relieved at 8 p.m. He was at the time writing up the log. At the port and starboard scuttles men were posted as look-outs. Another of the crew was standing his trick at the helm.

Stepping up to the chart-table Tomayn tapped Barr on the shoulder.

"You've altered course," he declared.

"Yes, sir," admitted Barr readily.

"Why?"

"Orders, sir."

"Whose?"

"The Captain's."

"Why?"

The young lieutenant was quite unaware of the strained relations between Preston and the charterer during the forenoon. Peter had determined not to prejudice his subordinate against Tomayn by relating the incident. Nor had Mackie mentioned it.

Nevertheless there was something in Tomayn's tone and manner that irritated the young officer. Strictly speaking Tomayn had no right to be in the navigation room; but, since Preston had raised no objection, Barr did not care to take the responsibility of asking the intruder to go.

"You'd better ask Captain Preston, sir," he replied mildly.

"You're insolent!" stormed Tomayn. "I'll make a point of reporting you to the directors when we get back to England."

Barr made no reply. Unobserved he touched a push that rang a bell in Preston's private cabin.

Tomayn was still blustering when Preston entered the navigation room.

"What is it, Mr. Barr?" he inquired.

"The young man won't give me any explanation why the airship's course has been altered," said

## 64      The Secret of the Plateau

Tomayn, before Barr had a chance to reply to the Captain's question.

"It was in consequence of my orders, Mr. Tomayn," said Preston. "Since you wish to know, it is because the *Vorwärts* is reported to be in a disabled condition and requiring assistance."

Tomayn could not conceal his gratification.

"That's good!" he exclaimed.

"That we are going to give him a hand, do you mean?" asked Peter.

"No, no! Confound you, I mean it!" spluttered the charterer. "I'm paying for this airship at so much a day, am I not? Think I'm going to chuck money away 'cause von Müller's made a hash of things? Hang it all! While we're fooling around with the *Vorwärts* the *Jeanne d'Arc* will be there before us and de Nonancourt will have staked out his claim."

"You rotter!" thought Preston. "And by birth you're von Müller's compatriot!" Then aloud: "Well, you see, Mr. Tomayn, the *Vorwärts* is disabled. She looks like being out of the picture. If we give her a tow to Wadi Halfa there'll be a good sum due to us for salvage, and as charterer you stand in, you know."

It was a clever move on Preston's part. Although Tomayn was enormously rich he was also avaricious. The Captain's suggestion was a tempting bait for his cupidity.

"In that case I suppose it's all right," rejoined Tomayn. "What amount for salvage do you think we'll get anyway?"



I. 201

WHERE THE BEDOUINS WERE THICKEST



"I don't know; that rests with the assessors," replied Peter cautiously.

"Of course," agreed Tomayn. "Of course. As a business man I ought to have remembered. All right, Captain Preston; I leave the business entirely in your hands."

"Thank you," replied Peter, hoping at the same time that Mackie had noticed the condescension that, should necessity arise, would be of considerable service.

Throughout the First and Middle Watches little occurred to ruffle the course of routine. Radio reports were sent out hourly, and these were generally followed by messages from the *Vorwärts*.

She was still awaiting the expected westerly wind. In a flat calm she had thrown out a grapnel and was now held to the barren desert by a two-hundred-feet rope.

Shortly before 4 a.m. Mackie, who was standing Middle Watch, was handed a message from the disabled airship.

"Have been forced to cut mooring-rope and ascend," reported von Müller. "Hostile tribesmen have attacked by rifle fire. Fear envelope has been punctured in many places. May be forced to descend through loss of gas. When may we expect you?"

## CHAPTER VIII

### To the Rescue

"Let's hope that the *Vorwärts* can keep aloft for another twenty-four hours," remarked Peter, when his chum awoke him to give him the grave news. "We *don't* want to be under rifle fire, because we have no means of defending ourselves except these half-dozen rifles and automatics."

"We'll have to follow Captain Starlight's example, wave a branch in token of peaceful intentions," suggested Mackie.

"Trying that with a crowd of South Sea Islanders is one thing, with a tribe of fanatical Bedouins armed with modern rifles the case is different," rejoined Preston. "They are so far removed from any European outpost—the nearest Italian one is four hundred miles away—that they haven't the slightest respect for authority, for British or Italian authority I mean. They are fanatics who believe that the killing of a *Kafir* or non-Mahometan is a sure passport to paradise. Where are we now?"

"Two hundred and twenty miles from the *Vorwärts*, if she's given her correct position."

"Then with luck we'll be on the spot just after

sunrise. All right, old son! Will you see that the arms are served out? Tell the fellows that on no account are they to open fire without orders."

According to Preston's forecast the *Explorer* was over the given position as the sun rose above the horizon. The airship was now at an altitude of 5000 feet, whence a range of view embracing a radius of nearly a hundred miles was possible. In fact, owing to the rarefaction and refraction of the atmosphere at that period of the day that distance was considerably exceeded. Even the jagged edges of Abu Djat—more than one hundred and fifty miles distant—could be discerned as they cut the skyline.

But there was no sign of the *Vorwärts*.

Since 4 a.m. no message had been received from her. Was it then possible that she had been forced down and set on fire by the ruthless inhabitants of the desert?

Tomayn, voluntarily out of his bunk despite the early hour, was the first to offer a possible explanation.

"Von Müller has been playing a trick upon us," he declared. "That yarn of his is all eyewash. He's done it merely to decoy us off our route."

"He wouldn't do such a thing," protested Mackie. "It's against the regulations relating to the sending out of false wireless reports."

Tomayn shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't know Germans as I do," he countered. "Who's going to prove that the *Vorwärts* hasn't sent

out not only a false appeal for assistance but a deliberately false position?"

Preston did not feel inclined to argue.

Armed with binoculars Mackie and he scanned the seemingly endless expanse of sand ruffled into regular furrows by the wind until it resembled the surface of the sea. For miles and miles nothing else broke the deadly monotony of the landscape, not even a clump of date palms marking an oasis and possibly the presence of water.

It was a district where human life could not exist except in the case of well-equipped caravans carrying sufficient food and water to last during the slow journey between any two known oases. Certainly no nomad tribes could find sustenance in that waste of burning sand. How then did this fact tally with von Müller's report of being attacked by hostile tribesmen?

Suddenly a disconcerting thought flashed across Preston's mind. The mere idea caused a cold sweat on his forehead. Had he made a blunder?

He went to the chart-table and examined the pencilled line he had placed upon the chart. His fears were realized.

Instead of allowing seven degrees westerly, he had stupidly worked out the course with seven degrees easterly deviation. The net result was that the *Explorer* had been fourteen degrees out of her correct course, and consequently eighty miles from her supposed position.

It was a humiliating predicament for the youthful

commander. He might be able to resort to bluff and invent some excuse for making for the revised position, but Preston was too honest to descend to such a subterfuge.

"I've made a silly error," he announced. "Eight points to starboard, quartermaster."

It was on the point of Tomayn's tongue to make some sarcastic remark. He thought again. In spite of his dislike of Preston the charterer could not help recognizing the former's moral pluck in accepting responsibility. So he said nothing, but mentally resolved to make a note of the incident for further use if required.

Twenty-three minutes after the *Explorer* had altered course, the partly disabled *Vorwärts* was sighted almost dead ahead. A few minutes more were sufficient to bring the succouring airship almost to a standstill within a hundred yards of the German craft.

The latter was in a bad way. She had severed the grapnel-line (or else the hostile tribesmen had done so), but owing to the loss of gas she was slowly yet surely losing altitude. At most she was a thousand feet above the ground and drifting slowly in a faint northerly breeze. The sandy desert beneath her was black with men, some mounted on horses and most of the rest on dromedaries. Chary of wasting precious ammunition, and confident that the helpless gas-bag was doomed to fall to earth, the natives were following her slow progress. Yet with inborn caution they took good care to keep clear of the various objects dropped

by the airship's crew in order to retard her involuntary descent.

"Why doesn't von Müller use his machine-guns?" remarked Tomayn. "He's no sentimentalist and he's in danger. What's the man thinking about?"

At that moment rifle fire broke out from the after nacelle of the *Vorwärts*. Probably some of the crew had been firing before the *Explorer's* arrival, but, apart from scattering, the Bedouins paid slight heed to the bullets that knocked up showers of sand.

"This is going to be a tougher job than when we took the AU445 in tow, old son," remarked Hugh to his chum. "We don't want bullets through the ballonets; yet——"

"We'll have to make the blighters shift," decided Preston. "There are limits to human endurance. We'll charge them."

Mackie stared at his friend in astonishment.

"Mean it!" continued Peter. "Full ahead!"

The airship quivered under the action of the eight powerful propellers. Peter, himself at the wheel, brought the horizontal rudder into play.

Overcoming the lift of the Crophelium-filled ballonets, the *Explorer*, dipping her bows, sped obliquely towards the ground, heading for the spot where the crowd of Bedouins was thickest.

It was an act calculated to strike panic into the hearts of the fanatical tribesmen. To see a huge object hurtling towards them to the accompaniment

of the deafening whirr of the propellers was too much for even their hardened nerves.

Some threw themselves flat upon the ground, wrapping their heads in their *burnouses* with the instinct of a hunted ostrich. Others, bending low on their horses' necks or leaning sideways from their camel saddles, strove to remove themselves from the path of the super-demon of the air, a monster that in fact surpassed all the fantastic creations of the Evil One that figured in the stories told around their camp fires.

It was also a nerve-racking ordeal to Preston, to say nothing of the rest of the crew who were in a position to see what was transpiring.

The observation window of the steering cabin was twenty feet above the under side of the envelope. At nearly 180 miles an hour, Peter had to gauge the correct distance from the undulating ground. True, there was the cushion of air that tended to prevent the *Explorer* making contact with the ground, but the danger of impact was still there. A few feet too low and the envelope would be ripped from end to end and the airship and all her crew would be hurled in a tangled mass upon the sand.

Putting the helm hard over, Preston made the airship describe a complete circle, scattering the ring of Bedouins in all directions. Blinded by the eddying clouds of sand in her wake, deafened by the whirring of the propellers, dazed by the rush of the enormous envelope, they were too terrified to think of anything but flight.

By the time the *Explorer* had commenced to regain altitude, the *Vorwärts*' assailants were fleeing headlong across the desert.

"Take her, Hugh!" exclaimed Peter, stepping aside and wiping his forehead. "Get way off her."

For some moments Preston was too exhausted by his ordeal to do anything but flop helplessly against the bulkhead.

The excitement had been too much for Tomayn. He was lying in a dead faint.

Stepping figuratively into the breach, Mackie rang for "stop", and allowed the airship to remain almost stationary at a height of a thousand feet. Then he waited until his chum was able to resume control.

Meanwhile the *Vorwärts* was still slowly dropping earthwards.

Through a hatchway on the upper surface of her envelope appeared a man holding a pair of hand-signalling flags. He was followed by an officer in uniform whom Mackie correctly guessed to be Herr von Müller.

Since von Müller could speak English and his signalmen could not, the former spelt out his message for the latter to transmit.

In a few sentences the position of affairs on board the *Vorwärts* was explained. The motors were out of action owing to particles of sand clogging the mechanism. The driving chains of the propellers, which were lubricated with oil, had jammed owing to the accumulation of grit, although, as in the case of the *Explorer*, this

would have been prevented had graphite been the lubricant.

The sandstorm had also accounted for the machine-guns having been put out of action.

But the most serious trouble was the loss of helium gas by reason of several of the balloonets having been punctured by hostile bullets. Men were already engaged in putting gas-tight patches over the holes, but von Müller regretted to say that he had not sufficient gas in pressure-cylinders to give the airship requisite buoyancy.

Could the Commander of the *Explorer* supply him with a quantity of gas to enable the *Vorwärts* to become air-worthy?

This was a difficult request to accede to. Crop-helium, the gas employed in all airships of the *Black Comet* fleet and in the lighter-than-air craft of the Royal Air Force, was manufactured under a strictly guarded secret process. Foreign Governments would be willing to pay enormous sums to gain knowledge of its components.

By this time Preston was able "to get a grip on things". The fateful decision was his.

"Tell von Müller we'll supply him with a couple of charged cylinders, Hugh," he agreed. "But we'll have to send someone to keep an eye on the cylinders and see that their contents are used solely for their proper purpose."

"All right, I'll do that," replied Mackie. "I'll go."  
"You?"

"Why not? I'm only a supernumerary, you know."

Preston's decision was communicated to the *Vorwärts*, and the task of transhipping the two cylinders of Crophelium gas was put into operation.

Fortunately there was still little or no wind. Both airships came to rest on the ground within a hundred yards of each other, and then, to the astonishment of the Germans, Mackie alighted and strolled towards the *Vorwärts* with a metal cylinder six feet in length and a foot or more in diameter comfortably tucked under each arm.

Empty, those cylinders would each weigh not far short of two hundredweight; filled with Crophelium under a pressure of eighty pounds to the square inch they tipped the scale at fourteen pounds.

"*Himmel!*" gasped the astonished German. "Will that be enough to give the lift?"

"Yes, Herr von Müller," replied Mackie reassuringly. "And with me on board as well. There will be plenty in reserve too."

Von Müller gave an order and several of the crew descended in order to gather most of the articles they had dumped overboard to lighten the disabled airship. This they did. They also collected a quantity of "souvenirs" which in their frenzied flight the Bedouins had left behind them.

While Hugh manipulated the cylinders and commenced to release the gas into the repaired balloonets, von Müller stood beside him and gave him details of the mishap that had so nearly ended in disaster.

"Ach! It was a colossal sandstorm!" he declared. "I who have been ten years in the East have never seen such a one. We rose to five thousand metres but we could not escape. The sand found its way everywhere. Even the instruments—our superb instruments!—were choked. We could hardly breathe. The sand-laden air rasped our lungs. When the storm abated we were at the mercy of the air-currents. Are you sure the supply of gas you bring will suffice?"

Hugh again assured von Müller that it would be so.

He was still connecting up the cylinders to the inlet pipes of the balloonets when the German Captain excitedly touched his arm.

"Look, Herr Mackie!" he exclaimed. "Who comes? Surely you have not children for your crew?"

Glancing through one of the scuttles Hugh caught sight of a diminutive figure rigged out in white duck uniform and wearing a double-crowned sun helmet several sizes too big for him. In one hand he carried a suit-case; in the other a couple of folded blankets.

It was Tommy Smith. Ankle-deep in the soft sand, he was making his way in the now blazing heat towards the *Vorwärts*.

"Are you there, sir?" inquired the lad, in a shrill voice. "Captain Preston told me to report to you."

"It is my orderly, Herr von Müller," explained Mackie, guessing the reason why Peter had sent the boy to him.

Von Müller laughed. The comparison between this

puny youth and the strapping men who composed his crew bordered upon the ludicrous.

" You Englishmen believe in saving weight, I see," he remarked; then, addressing the quartermaster at the entry-port, told him to admit the new arrival.

Throwing his chest out and saluting smartly Tommy Smith handed Mackie a pencilled note.

" Excuse me," said Hugh apologetically to von Müller.

" I've sent our stowaway along," read Mackie. " It may be sixty hours before we get the *Vorwärts* to a repair-base. You'll want some sleep, so I'm lending you a watch-dog. P. P."

Mackie understood. However thankful von Müller might be for the *Explorer's* assistance, there might be a possibility, even if only a slight one, that he would be tempted to secure a small quantity of Crophelium gas for purposes of analysis.

Peter Preston was merely putting into practice the precept " Be prepared!"

## CHAPTER IX

### In Tow

Half an hour later sufficient Crophelium was liberated into the *Vorwärts'* balloonets to give her the required lift. Slowly she ascended to an altitude of two thousand feet. She was now virtually a "free balloon", no longer held to the ground, but was nevertheless at the mercy of the wind.

Now came the tricky operation of getting the enormous German airship in tow.

Gracefully the *Explorer* forged ahead, turning in wide spirals until she gained a height of five hundred feet above her disabled rival.

From the former's starboard quarter a light line weighted with a lump of soft iron was paid out until the weight dangled about two hundred feet below. Another line was then lowered from the port quarter. To this was attached a fairly powerful piece of magnetized metal.

Both lines began to oscillate until the magnet and the soft iron united in a firm embrace. The first stages of providing a double towing span were now completed. Two hawsers were necessary, there being sufficient distance between them to clear the *Explorer*'s horizontal

and vertical rudders when the strain was taken up.

Conned from aft the *Explorer* gently manœuvred until she was almost directly over the *Vorwärts*. Then, forging slowly ahead, she decreased altitude until the under magnet and metal weight came within reach of two of the German crew who had been stationed on top of the envelope at about forty feet from where it curved towards the bows.

The two men then began hauling in the lines, which in turn were attached to flexible steel hawsers paid out from either quarter of the *Explorer*.

As soon as the ends of the hawsers were received, more Germans hurried to their comrades' assistance, and the task of making fast the eye-plates bolted through the envelope to girders near the bows was begun.

It was a difficult nerve-racking operation. Although there was only a slight westerly wind the vagaries of air pressure owing to radiation from the hot sand of the desert was causing both airships to "pump", or rise and fall vertically, with the result that there was an irregular strain upon the hawsers.

Men with life-lines attached were lowered over the convex-shaped bows until they were able to shackle the towing-hawsers to their respective eye-bolts.

At last von Müller was able to give the information  
"All fast!"

Now came the crucial test. An error of judgment on Commander Preston's part might easily cause complete disaster. The hawsers might part: they could be replaced; but too severe a jerk might result in the eye-

plates and attached girders being torn bodily from the bows of the *Vorwärts*. Correspondingly, similar havoc might be played with the after part of the *Explorer*.

Gradually the sag of the hawsers became less and less as the *Explorer* took up her position ahead and at a slightly greater elevation than her tow.

Both craft forged ahead. Speed increased more and more until, with her radio motors running at four-fifths of their maximum number of revolutions, the *Explorer*, with the *Vorwärts* astern, soon attained a speed of between twelve and fifteen miles per hour.

It was a mere crawl, but it was in the right direction, although Khartum was still a very long way off.

Nevertheless Preston and his crew were elated by the success that so far had attended their efforts. The only disgruntled individual in the *Explorer* was Tomayn, but for the present he was too weak to protest.

When he fainted he had given his head a severe blow and his teeth had bitten into his tongue. In consequence he could not talk except with considerable difficulty and pain. Lying in his bunk Tomayn spent most of the time writing messages to Preston to know what progress the *Explorer* was making and whether any wireless message had been received reporting the progress of the long-silent *Jeanne d'Arc*.

As regards the first question, Peter truthfully replied that the motors were running well above their normal cruising speed; but he could not satisfy Tomayn's anxiety concerning de Nonancourt's airship, for the simple reason that he did not know.

Hour after hour passed as the two airships plugged slowly towards their immediate goal.

On board the *Vorwärts* the mechanics were not idle. With Teutonic thoroughness they were working methodically, taking down the motors that were capable of being reconditioned without having recourse to outside assistance. By sunset four of these engines were functioning, with the result that speed gradually increased to fifty miles per hour.

One aggravating fact, as far as Preston was concerned, was that on this run to Khartum the *Explorer* was at one point within five hundred miles of Zaghamedi. Unable to proceed direct to her objective she must increase that distance by nearly fifty per cent before, having seen her German rival safely to the air station, she was free to turn her bows westward for the hitherto impregnable plateau.

All this while Hugh Mackie was having what he thought fit to describe as a "sticky time". The Germans were unremitting in their hospitality. They gave him pressing invitations to join them in the mess-room, offered him wine, cigars, and cigarettes galore. A cabin was placed at his disposal, and when he politely declined on the score of having to "stand-by" the gas-supply, they offered to let one of their own engineers deputize for him.

Rightly or wrongly Hugh put down these demonstrations of friendship and hospitality to ulterior motives and adhered firmly to his decision to stay where he was.

Then Tommy Smith came in for a great deal of attention. The crew of the *Vorwärts*, many of whom could speak English, appeared to want to treat him as a temporary mascot. They gave him sweetmeats, most of which the lad surreptitiously slid into the voluminous pockets of his over-sized jacket. They tried to lure him to other parts of the ship where they might be able to question him concerning various details of the *Explorer's* construction. Of this Tommy Smith knew little; but he kept a well-assumed dignity, mentally vowing that there would be "nothin' doin'".

Alive to his responsibilities, he was never far from Mackie. When the latter snatched intervals of sleep, stretched on a loaned mattress laid in the alley-way that reeked of helium fumes, Tommy was the alert watch-dog.

For forty-eight hours Mackie and his young assistant kept watch and ward over the two cylinders. No more-than-curious German had the faintest chance of secretly extracting any of the secret gas if, as Hugh had supposed, he might be tempted to do so.

To von Müller Mackie explained very plausibly that such was the powerful nature of the gas that neglect on his part might easily result in the *Vorwärts'* balloonets being burst by the enormous interior pressure, and that in the hands of an unskilled man Crophelium was certain to be as dangerous as dynamite.

"Otherwise Commander Preston would have let your engineers have the handling of it, and I should

be spared a decidedly strenuous spell of duty," he added ingenuously.

Von Müller smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

If he had his views on the matter he kept them to himself. But the main point was that the secret properties of the loaned *Crophelium* remained secret.

Meanwhile the *Explorer*, her motors functioning smoothly, held on her course with the *Vorwärts* in tow. Thanks to most of the latter's propellers being now in action the strain on the hawsers was considerably eased, but with the increased speed the German airship's steering was somewhat erratic on account of the eddies in the wake of the towing craft.

Nevertheless soon after dawn Preston found that he had made a somewhat faulty landfall when the Nile was sighted.

He was puzzled. He had expected to see the White and Blue Niles where they effected a junction at Khartum. There was only one river with traces of a dried-up nullah joining it on its right bank. Instead of the palatial Government buildings of the capital of the Sudan only a few native villages perched upon the steep sides of the river banks were visible. Across the muddy river a white-canopied train was travelling in a north-easterly direction.

It was the railway that gave Preston his position. He realized his error. During the night, and unknown to him, a steady south-easterly breeze had sprung up. Under its influence the *Explorer*, hampered by her tow, had "sagged" well to lee'ard, and instead of

striking the Nile in the vicinity of Khartum she had sighted the river in the neighbourhood of Korti.

"Von Müller must be laughing in his sleeve over my navigation, Jim," he confided to Barr, after he had ordered the *Explorer* forty-five degrees to starboard.

Nevertheless Preston was rather glad of the result of his error. The new course of the airship was approximately over the route taken by Wolseley's brilliant but futile expedition for the relief of General Gordon in 1885.

Peter's grandfather had taken part in that daring dash across the desert from Korti to Metemmeh, and the young Commander was now able to visualize in comfort the tedious determined march of the little British army; how in a hollow square it resisted the impetuous attacks of fanatical Arabs, at Abu Klea and elsewhere, only to find that Khartum had fallen and that the heroic Gordon had met his death.

Less than half a century ago Captain Angus Preston was marching with his company across that desert at an average rate of two miles an hour; now his grandson was speeding at over a mile a minute, even though the airship was impeded by the drag of her partly disabled rival.

Four hours after leaving Korti the *Explorer* cast off her tow eighty feet above the recently constructed Government airship sheds on the outskirts of Khartum. Then, waiting until the *Vorwärts* was safely on the ground, Preston sent off a radio message announcing

84      The Secret of the Plateau

the successful termination of his aerial salvage operations.

The *Explorer* then made fast to one of the mooring-masts, received her loaned property in the shape of Mackie, Tommy Smith, and two replenished Crophelium-filled cylinders.

Reluctantly declining offers of hospitality on the genuine plea that enough delay had been caused in assisting the *Vorwärts*, Preston gave orders for the mooring-hawser to be slipped.

Escorted for the next hour by a flight of Royal Air Force bombers, the *Explorer* headed westward at full speed for the mysterious plateau of Zaghamedi.

## CHAPTER X

### The Sandstorm

"Sir!" exclaimed Cotton, the quartermaster on duty. "There's something strange ahead."

It was nearly noon. The *Explorer* was approximately half-way between Khartum and the objective of her outward voyage.

The airship was flying low across the desert, her altitude being a mere two thousand feet, since Tomayn expressed a wish to make a more comprehensive survey of the route than would have been possible at a great height. Yet at two thousand feet the temperature registered was only eighty degrees, a vast difference from that at ground-level. During the day the thermometer might easily show 140 degrees, while at night, owing to the rapid radiation from the sand, the mercury frequently drops almost to freezing-point.

Hearing the quartermaster's announcement Preston left the chart-table and went to the bow observation window. Right ahead, and at that moment at a distance of five miles or so, was a tall dark column that looked like a gigantic pillar of brown stone somewhat resembling in shape the domestic contrivance known as an "egg-timer".

One glance told Peter the nature of the object. It was a whirling pillar of sand raised almost vertically by a freak of nature similar to that which produces a waterspout at sea.

At a hundred and twenty miles an hour the airship was rapidly approaching the dangerous object. The danger was twofold—the column of sand might break and the *Explorer* might be overwhelmed by the descending mass of solid matter in the upper half of the pillar, or she might be drawn into the vortex of the spiral air-current and be rendered unmanageable.

"Hard a-port!" ordered the Commander.

Even as the *Explorer* swung to the right another sandspout began to raise its head. It started like the bubbling of boiling tar. Then the quivering dome, spinning slowly "clock-wise", rose almost vertically.

The new danger was only a mile or so away and right in the track of the airship's new course.

Another and yet another column of sand was flung skywards until the *Explorer*, turn where she would, was confronted by a whirlwind of sand.

It was a new experience as far as Peter Preston was concerned. He had encountered sandstorms before—masses of grit carried more or less in a straight line by a furious wind. This was a different phenomenon, these numerous whirling vertical columns of sand surrounding a belt of still sultry air.

In the midst of that zone of moveless air was the *Explorer*.

Peter dared not stop the engines and let the airship

drift. The whirling columns not only revolved on their own axes, but the whole system was moving after the fashion of a cyclonic storm. At the centre of such a storm is found its most dangerous point. To rise vertically was no better alternative, while for obvious reasons it was out of the question for the *Explorer* to charge through the barrier.

Preston had to make up his mind quickly. Some of the sand-glass-like formations had broken, and, the particles still held in suspension by the up-draught, were spreading fan-wise overhead. The sun was obscured by the almost solid cloud.

"Great heavens! What are we to do?" exclaimed Tomayn, grasping Peter by the arm.

Shaking off the terrified man, Preston ordered "Full ahead", at the same time depressing the horizontal rudders.

His one chance was to dash through the barrier as close to the ground as he dared go.

Switching on the light over the instrument board, Preston held the airship on her steeply oblique downward course. It was too dark to see anything without. Already the sand was rattling on the *Explorer's* nose with a disconcerting rasping noise that deafened all other sounds within the airship's hull.

All Peter's attention was riveted on the instrument board. Knowing the approximate height of the land above sea-level he had to make his calculations accordingly and "flatten out" when the altimeter registered two thousand feet, or a mere three hundred feet above

the desert. He had to watch the compass to keep direction and counteract any possible eddy against the ship's side. Also he had to observe the hands of the clinometer which would give warning of a dangerous "list" on the airship's major axis. That might be corrected by a sharp alteration of vertical helm; but if not "met" smartly the airship might turn completely over, with dire results.

For ten long-drawn-out seconds the encounter with the unknown force of the sandstorm continued. Notwithstanding the strength of her construction the airship writhed until her girders groaned under the strain. Every one of her crew who had not taken the precaution to hold on was hurled to the deck. Unsecured objects flew from side to side. A failure in the lighting system plunged the for'ard cabins into utter darkness.

Then, with a suddenness that rendered Peter temporarily blind by the glare, the *Explorer* emerged from the wall of eddying sand into the brilliant sunshine.

He had the presence of mind to give five degrees elevation to the horizontal rudders and this ensured that the airship would gain altitude before he shouted to Barr to relieve him at the control position.

It was some minutes before Peter was able to see with any distinctness.

" You all right, James?" he inquired laconically.

" I'm all right," replied Barr. " But I'm dashed if I can see anything!"

" Then why didn't you tell me so before?" asked

the Commander, thinking that his subordinate was similarly suffering from the sudden intense glare.

"You can see for yourself," rejoined Barr. "The window is frosted."

It was, but not in the accepted sense. Owing to the friction of the particles of sand the plate glass of all the windows and scuttles for'ard of the 'midship section had been scored with innumerable minute lines, rendering the hitherto transparent substance semiopaque. The glass certainly allowed light to pass through it, but for observation purposes it was useless.

That was where the foresight and experience of the constructors came in useful. Spare panes had been placed on board against such a contingency. All that remained to be done was to get way off the airship, unbolt the metal frames of the windows, and replace them with spares.

Half an hour's work was sufficient, and once more the *Explorer* was able to resume her flight.

"If there are often storms like that no wonder the secret of Zaghamedi is well guarded," observed Tomayn. "I've had ten years' experience of sandstorms, but I've never met with one of that magnitude and intensity."

"We were fortunate to escape it," remarked Preston.

"Fortunate? My dear sir, it was your skill and resourcefulness that got us through," declared the charterer, anxious to minimize his exhibition of alarm during the critical time. "And it speaks volumes for your company that spare windows were on board."

90      The Secret of the Plateau

What will happen if these are similarly damaged?  
Have you others?"

"One more spare set."

"And then?"

"If they go," replied Peter, "I'm afraid we'll have to exchange them with the glass from your cabin—and mine! They are interchangeable, you see, and the only disadvantage is that we won't be able to look out."

"Then I hope I shan't be deprived of my view," rejoined Tomayn, who was in the habit of spending much of his time in his own cabin.

"Trees on the port-bow!" announced the look-out man.

"Trees, nonsense!" snapped Tomayn, who, having made himself acquainted with the latest survey maps, was aware that for hundreds of miles there was nothing but a waterless desert.

"The man's right!" declared Barr. "Look!"

A few miles off was a large oasis. Tall slender palms surrounded a small lake. By it was an encampment of black tents. Men in white robes were resting under the shade of the palms, while numerous camels and dromedaries were drinking on the shores. All this was clearly visible by means of binoculars.

"What a discovery!" exclaimed Barr. "That will be something to report—an oasis where none is known to the Government Aerial Survey. But I say! It's—it's—"

Astonishment held him spellbound, for, as the

*Explorer* rapidly approached the belt of verdure the palms began to shiver and distort themselves in a weird way. The white-clad Arabs too became elongated, while the camels appeared to be at least fifty feet high and grotesquely slim in proportion.

Then the whole oasis vanished into thin air, leaving nothing but a trackless waste of wind-furrowed sand.

"A mirage!" exclaimed Peter.

"Exactly," agreed Tomayn. "Didn't I say there wasn't an oasis?"

"But," asked Barr, "there must be the real oasis somewhere? You can't have a mirage of something that doesn't exist?"

"You cannot," agreed Tomayn. "But the actual object may be hundreds of miles from the image. The atmosphere plays strange tricks both with light and sound. It is possible to hear heavy gunfire a hundred miles away and not to be able to do so when only twenty from the source of the sound. You get similar results from wireless. A low-powered receiving set often picks up a far distant station when it fails to detect stronger signals from much nearer transmitting stations. Broadly speaking, light and sound under certain conditions play leap-frog. I once saw minarets both upright and inverted when I was in the Sahara, and the nearest town was three hundred and fifty miles away."

"The direction of the oasis is, I take it, roughly in a straight line beyond the mirage taken from our outlook?" inquired Peter.

" Possibly," replied the charterer guardedly.

" In that case the oasis must be on the other side of Zaghamedi then," pursued Preston. " And the image must be transmitted through air right over the ten thousand feet plateau?"

" It seems like it," agreed Tomayn. " Unless, which is unlikely, we sight a real oasis somewhere between here and Zaghamedi."

But no such fertile spot was seen. Five hours later the crew of the *Explorer* caught their first glimpse of the formidable natural fortifications of the mysterious country of Zaghamedi.

## CHAPTER XI

### The Horrors of the Night

The first impression of the object of the expedition was that of a long low wall rising just above the expanse of sand.

As the airship approached, the wall appeared to grow higher and higher until details of its composition became discernible.

Sheer from the surrounding desert rose the massive almost unbroken line of dark red rock to a height equal to thirty times that of St. Paul's Cathedral. North and south the stupendous barrier extended for a distance of about seventy miles. If the report given by the commander of the Zeppelin that passed over it during the Great War were correct the plateau was roughly equal in breadth to its length.

At three miles off it was quite easy to pick out details from the airship by means of binoculars. One of the chief objects of interest was the presence of several waterfalls. Through wide chasms, small in comparison with the huge bulk of the cliffs, torrents of water poured but never reached the base in liquid form. By some as yet unknown agency the water was

checked in its fall and half-way between the top and bottom of the line of cliffs it was dissipated in a cloud of spray that hung like a long thin stratum of cloud. At least a dozen of these outlets for the copious water supply of the plateau could be seen, but in no case did the falling stream reach the level of the surrounding country.

"Why is that?" asked Preston of the charterer.

Now that the *Explorer* was virtually at the gateway of her objective, the barrier of reserve that had existed between Tomayn and the officers of the airship had been broken down. He was willing to give any information he possessed concerning the scientific aspects of the place; they were glad to be able to draw upon the source of knowledge. They realized that they were being confronted by problems of the Unknown, concerning which the hard and fast rules of aerial navigation were of slight account. There was something very mysterious about the plateau. A Zeppelin had passed over it. That might have been a sheer fluke; but half a dozen airplanes had been known to have been lost there. Would-be rescuing planes had gone but had not returned. Of their fate nothing was known.

Now the *Explorer* was about to pit her strength against the difficulties and dangers of this unknown region. That the plateau was inhabited there was no doubt; but by whom? Was it by natural forces or by human agency that previous airmen had met an unknown fate? These were but a few of the problems that confronted the crew of the *Explorer*.

"Some climb that," remarked Barr, gazing awe-struck at the stupendous cliffs.

"It's as if the *Explorer* were a toy boat under the cliffs of Dover," suggested Mackie, in an attempt to make a relative comparison.

"Or a wee caterpillar trying to scale the rock of Edinburgh Castle," supplemented Sinclair.

"Except that a caterpillar isn't lighter than air, and we are," added Peter. "But I don't think it advisable to make the attempt to-day. It will be night before we know where we are."

"There's the full moon," said Hugh.

"Yes, but that's not the same thing even though the light is quite brilliant. We'll wait."

Had Preston but known it, night with a full moon was far and away the best time. Before he found that out the *Explorer* was to be baffled again and again in her efforts to effect a landing upon the plateau of Zaghamedi.

Just before sunset, although the sun was hidden from their view by the towering mass of rock two hours earlier, the airship came to earth at a distance of about a mile from the nearest part of the plateau. Several of the balloonets were deflated in order to give her negative buoyancy, while as a precaution against being swept away by a strong wind the *Explorer* was anchored by the bows by means of two flexible steel cables, swivelled and attached to mushroom anchors buried in the sand.

"She'll do nicely," declared Peter optimistically, when the mooring operations were completed. "I

was doubtful whether there was magnetic influence in these rocks that might cripple our supply of radio-electricity. We've had that before to-day, haven't we, old son?"

Mackie nodded. The reminiscence of *Black Comet II*'s foiled attempt to reach the Island of Ni Tolu remained vividly impressed upon his memory. Ni Tolu had been a hard nut to crack; Zaghamedi—well, Zaghamedi *was* Zaghamedi!

The *Explorer* had been brought to rest with her bows pointing east and with her stern pointing in the direction of the titanic table mountain. Double watches were ordered, some of the crew standing by the release valves so that the deflated balloonets could be refilled at an instant's notice. The motor engineers, also in double watches, remained at their posts ready to set the eight propellers in motion should it be necessary for the airship to combat any drastic change of atmospheric conditions.

Barr was told off to stand the First Watch, Peter himself volunteering for the most tedious of the night watches—the Middle; while the Morning Watch was to be kept by Hugh Mackie.

Look-outs were posted fore and aft, the latter being strictly enjoined to watch for any untoward happenings on the brink of the plateau.

Barr's spell of duty passed uneventfully. At eight o'clock the full moon rose majestically above the eastern horizon, flooding the expanse of sand in mellowing rays of rich yellow light. When Jimmy Barr

## The Horrors of the Night 97

"handed over" at midnight the beetling cliffs of Zaghamedi were to be seen almost as clearly as in the light of a winter's sun at home.

"Nothing to report," announced the relieved watch-keeper. "It's getting chilly, though. You'd better shove on a pilot-coat, Peter."

"Thanks for the tip, old son; I will," replied Preston. When these two men were alone the official style of address was dropped by mutual desire and consent. In the presence of others Barr would have punctilioously addressed the Commander as "sir".

At a quarter past midnight Preston visited the look-out men, consulted thermometer, barometer, and hygrometer and recorded the readings in the log, adding the information that the wind was "east force one". That in itself was significant. What little breeze there was was blowing away from the plateau notwithstanding the high lee afforded by the ten thousand feet altitude of the cliffs.

At One Bell, Peter, donning a heavy bridge coat, climbed the vertical ladder between two sections of ballonets and gained the hatchway on the top of the envelope. For almost its entire length ran a catwalk—a narrow gangway flush with the metal covering. Normally, when the airship was in flight, there was no protective hand-rail, but automatically as the hatchway was raised a number of hinged stanchions with a single hand-rope rose into a vertical position.

Armed with a pair of X 6 night-glasses, for reflex binoculars even in the bright moonlight would not

give satisfactory results, Peter first scanned the desert to the north, east, and south of the stationary airship. Nothing but a waste of sand, undulating in places, rewarded his gaze. Not so much as a solitary thorn or any other form of vegetation was to be seen in that barren waste.

Then he turned his attention to the plateau. One peculiar circumstance attracted his notice almost at once. Four waterfalls that a few hours previously had lost themselves in spray midway between the brink and the base of the granite cliffs now preserved their shape until the falling columns of water hurled themselves against the surrounding sand. Yet although the *Explorer* was but a mile from the nearest waterfall and what little wind there was blew from that direction, the expected roar of foaming water was almost inaudible. It sounded more like the noise emitted from a hollow shell when held to the ear rather than the deafening sound that might be expected.

"That's strange—very," thought Preston. "I've half a mind to rout Hugh out and send him with a couple of hands to investigate. Why not?"

Preston had lowered his binoculars and was about to make for the hatchway when a ruddy glare silhouetted the edge of the plateau. Then several apparently small tongues of fire shot upwards and remained flickering against the moonlit sky.

Quickly Peter raised his glasses again. Some moments elapsed before the fiery patch came within the field of the lenses.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Commander.  
"What is it?"

By aid of the binoculars the brink of the cliff was brought within a hundred yards of the fascinated observer. Moving slowly on the extreme edge were three living creatures. As they stood out blackly against the glare it was impossible to decide whether they were human or simian; but it seemed certain that they had been trapped in a semi-circle of fire and that semi-circle was slowly yet surely contracting and forcing them to the very edge of the terrific precipice.

A moment later and other forms, undoubtedly those of human beings, since they wore coverings of loose material, appeared on the outer edge of the curve of hissing flames. They were dancing, prancing, and waving their arms. Their whole demeanour, if the binoculars were to be trusted, was that of frenzy, of demoniac enjoyment of the spectacle of three creatures endowed with life being about to be forced either to leap headlong or else to be slowly devoured by the approaching flames.

Suddenly the left-hand figure was enveloped in a sheet of fire. Quite possibly the two were human victims of some religious festival, sacrifices to a heathen deity. Or they might be criminals condemned to a hideous death. Certain it was that the first to perish had had his body smeared with some highly combustible substance.

He leapt.

Horrified yet fascinated by the spectacle Peter

followed his downward course, or tried to do so, but his hands shook so violently that he was unable to hold the binoculars steady. The meteor-like trail of flames passed beyond the field of the glasses and before Preston could pick it up again it had vanished.

He was just in time to see another victim begin a ten-thousand-feet leap. With ever-increasing speed the head of that artificially-made comet hurtled towards the ground. At less than a third of that stupendous distance the blazing light vanished utterly.

The same fate befel the third victim. His fiercely blazing corpse dropped for about three thousand feet; the blaze was suddenly extinguished and the rest of the terrific fall to the sands beneath was completed without Peter being able to follow its course.

Then a sea of liquid fire commenced to pour over the brink of the precipice to the accompaniment of the frenzied gesticulations of the savage horde. No doubt they were shouting, but the distance was too great for Preston to hear.

For quite five minutes the fiery torrent flowed, throwing a ruddy glare not only upon the surrounding wall of granite, but upon the gleaming envelope of the airship. Yet, as in the case of the waterfalls, the fire died completely out before it had reached a third of the way down the cliff. Then, almost as quickly as it had begun, the flow of liquid fire ceased.

The plateau, gaunt and forbidding, resumed its cold mysterious aspect in the moonlight.

By this time Preston realized that he was wanted.

The look-outs had spotted the glare. One of them had rushed off to acquaint the Commander, but Peter was not to be found. Unaware that he was on the top of the airship, the man raised the alarm, thinking that some mishap had befallen the Officer of the Watch. Barr, who had only just turned in, and Mackie, who was sleeping soundly against being routed out at 4 a.m., were quickly upon the scene, together with most of the watch who had been ordered to stand-by.

They were still debating what was to be done when into the conclave walked Preston.

"Murderous brutes!" he ejaculated.

The exclamation was received in amazed silence. Unaware of the tragedy of the plateau, the others could see no connexion between the denunciation and themselves, to whom it appeared to be addressed.

Hugh glanced apprehensively at his chum, thinking perhaps the heat of the previous days combined with the stress and excitement of the voyage had affected Peter's brain.

On his part Preston thought that the others had been watching the drama of the flaming torrent.

"What's up, sir?" inquired Barr.

"Up?" echoed Peter. "It's what's down! Zaghamedi's peopled by a horde of bloodthirsty savages. They've just set three poor brutes alight and made them jump over the precipice. I say! Who'll volunteer to go with me to investigate?"

"But they'll be dead," protested Mackie.

"Yes," continued Peter. "But it's not that. There's

102      The Secret of the Plateau

something very strange about the place. Before we attempt to land on the plateau we must find out——”

“ What?” inquired Hugh eagerly.

“ Something, but I don’t know what. Who’s game?”

Ten hands went up. Apparently everyone present was “ game ” in spite of an eerie sensation that there was something very mysterious to be investigated.

“ Good!” exclaimed Preston. “ Two will be sufficient. You for one, Barr, and—no, Mackie, your place is on board—and Sinclair.”

Quickly Peter made his preparations. His companions were bidden to put on warm clothing and thick boots. Each was to take a staff. In addition Peter provided himself with a Verey pistol and half a dozen cartridges. Otherwise they were unarmed.

Although most of the cabins of the airship were lighted up, her position, stern-foremost to the plateau, made it almost impossible for any light to be seen from aft. Seen from the top of the cliff her symmetrical shape would blend in the moonlight and be lost against the waste of sand. It was improbable that any of the inhabitants of Zaghamedi had sighted her arrival; for if they had they would doubtless have given some sign of activity during the hours of daylight.

At the distance of a mile the airship might be invisible, even in the strong moonlight, when viewed across the intervening stretch of radiating sand; accordingly Peter gave instructions for a white light of medium intensity to be displayed aft to guide the three pioneers back to the *Explorer*.

In spite of additional clothing Preston and his companions shivered in the night air when they alighted upon the sand. There was still little or no wind, and as their breath was expelled in clouds of vapour—it reminded Barr of a frosty day in England—the “steam” rose rapidly in the chilly air.

This was a circumstance of which Peter took particular note. So rapid was the radiation from the recently burning sand that there was a distinct vertical current of warm air.

The three made slow but steady progress. Their boots sank ankle-deep in the yielding sand. Some of the hillocks they encountered were so steep, though they rarely exceeded ten feet in height, that for every step they took they gained only a few inches. Sometimes they actually lost ground.

By the time they had covered the mile between the *Explorer* and the base of the cliff more than an hour had elapsed.

The moon was now almost overhead, consequently the face of the wall of rock was mottled with long shadows from the irregular projections. Looking upwards the impression was that the almost perpendicular front of the plateau was inclining outwards. It appeared to be moving, threatening to topple over bodily and overwhelm the inquisitive trio under millions of tons of solid granite.

The roar of tumbling water was now deafening. The noise had increased from a subdued rumble to a continuous roar like thunder. Two hundred yards

from the base of the cliff the sound was hardly more perceptible than it had been when heard from the airship. At a hundred yards, such were the weird acoustic properties of the place, the noise had suddenly increased in volume with hardly any intervening variation.

"This is what beats one," confessed Peter to his companions. "There's a barrage somewhere, invisible perhaps, but none the less real. Sound ceases beyond a certain point, and unless it's an optical illusion the streams, both of fire and water, cease to obey the laws of gravity. They appear to vanish. Mind you, I don't say they do. That's one of the things I want to find out."

"But that's falling all right, sir," observed Sinclair, pointing to the waterfall on their left, where a sheet of falling liquid was dropping upon the ground and throwing up a huge cloud of spray.

Even that cloud was a mystery. It overhung at a considerable height the place where the three explorers were standing; the moonbeams intercepted by the globules of moisture produced a perfect rainbow. Yet nothing in the nature of rain fell upon the upturned faces of Peter and his companions.

"Perfectly dry, this stuff," declared Preston, kicking at the sand to call attention to his remark.

Up flew a cloud of grey dust. Gradually it dispersed, not by falling to the ground but by rising vertically in the air until it mingled with the mushroom-shaped pall of vapour overhead.

"I believe there's a strong up-draught against the face of the cliff," said Barr.

"And I think you're right," agreed Peter. "That's all very well for spray and dust, but what about heavy objects? Come on, let's go nearer to the waterfall. You noticed that when we first arrived—during daylight—the fall appeared to terminate or dissolve at about one-third of the distance from the top of the plateau. Now, by night, it doesn't; it falls the whole distance. Why is that?"

Before they had taken another twenty steps Preston very nearly trod upon what appeared to be a gaunt thorn bush. At a second glance he discovered that the greyish object was a bleached skeleton. Everything pointed to the fact that it had belonged to a body that had fallen from an extraordinary height, for hardly a bone remained unbroken, while the skull had been completely battered in.

"That wasn't one of the men you saw fall, was it?" asked Barr.

"No fear," replied Peter. "This has been here for a considerable period. Look! There are dozens of them!"

Which was literally true. A large and shallow depression in the sand was almost covered with human remains in various stages of decay. Apparently the inhabitants of Zaghamedi were either in the habit of disposing of their dead by casting the bodies over the edge of the plateau or they had reserved this mode of burial for either criminals or victims of some hideous sacrificial rite.

"Don't let's go farther," protested Barr.

"We'll find what we came to look for," declared Preston resolutely. "That is, if we can. We can skirt this death-pit. What we want to discover is where this water goes and why it doesn't reach the ground under certain conditions."

A detour of about a hundred yards brought them actually underneath the waterfall. Drenched to the skin, almost blinded by the spray, Peter, who was leading, narrowly escaped falling over the edge of a deep pit.

It was here that the falling torrent lost itself. Although there was sand all around, the ground at this part was composed of hard sandstone, a fact that in itself was remarkable since it practically adjoined the perpendicular mass of granite.

Throughout countless ages water had fallen from the plateau upon the softer rock. Quite possibly the volume was greater long ago than it was now; but in any case the action of the water falling with terrific force upon the sandstone had bored an enormous hole through it to a substratum of porous sand.

Like an enormous sponge this sub-stratum absorbed water more quickly than it was supplied, copious though the supply was; or else there was a vast subterranean course for the torrent to take.

Hanging on to one another, the three approached as closely as they dared to the wide crater. By some freak of reflected light, although the towering heights of the plateau now interrupted their view of the moon, a perfect lunar rainbow was visible in the cloud of

spray, while half a dozen supplementary arcs of light shimmered amidst the falling water.

The sight held Preston and his companions in silent admiration. Sinclair, always of a practical turn of mind, was mentally planning a scheme for conducted tours to watch the lunar rainbows at the foot of Zaghamedi. Peter was trying to find a solution for the reason of this phenomenon, since it was not due to direct moonbeams; while Barr was puzzling his head to find a satisfactory solution to the mystery of where the water went to.

Suddenly their thoughts were rudely interrupted by a solid substance whizzing close to Sinclair's left shoulder and clattering with a metallic ring against the slippery rock.

It was a large broad-bladed spear. The haft, bound for two-thirds of its length with plaited leather, was intact, but the blade had been bent almost at right angles at two inches from the point.

The three lads commenced to run for cover.

Then Peter stopped.

"Hold on, you fellows!" he exclaimed, realizing that the weapon could not have been thrown with hostile intent, since it obviously must have fallen through several thousand feet of space. "Let's get possession of that trophy."

"But there may be more spears," protested Sinclair.

"Not intended for us," rejoined Preston. "That one was either dropped accidentally or else it has been thrown into the stream."

They retraced their steps and picked up the weapon. Examining the blade, Peter found that it was not a steel one, but had been wrought of an alloy of copper and iron. Obviously the people who forged weapons of this description belonged to a much earlier civilization than that of the Arab and Negro tribes of the interior of Africa. The latter had learnt how to temper metal. This one was of a "soft" variety, yet the workmanship was in advance of the hand-forged spears of the natives of the Sudan and Sahara.

While they were still examining their find Barr happened to glance in the direction of the *Explorer*. Someone on board was signalling with a flash lamp:

"Return: gale springing up!"

## CHAPTER XII

### Battling Through

"Best foot forward, lads!" exclaimed Preston. "One minute though. We'll let them know we've seen and understood the signal, or they'll keep on flashing."

He raised the Verey pistol above his head and pressed the trigger. The shell exploded close to the cliff, throwing out a vivid red light. Although those on board the airship could not fail to see the ruddy glow, the chances were that it would be invisible to any watchers on the plateau.

The three retraced their steps, guided by the fixed white light displayed from the *Explorer*.

At first they had no indication that the wind had sprung up. Except for the peculiar up-draught, the air was practically still; but after covering about a quarter of a mile Peter became aware of a distinct following wind. This also presented a baffling problem. The plateau was roughly ten thousand feet, or a little short of two miles, in height above the surrounding desert. At a quarter of a mile from its base one would hardly expect a true wind blowing away from the cliff, and yet this was what it seemed to be.

Then the guiding light appeared to diminish in

intensity. It was being dimmed by an intervening cloud of sand whipped aloft by the rising wind.

Quick to realize the danger of being lost in that trackless waste, Preston pulled out his pocket compass, laid it upon a slight ridge, and took a bearing of the light while it was still visible.

He was none too soon, for in less than a minute the light was entirely obscured.

Another hundred yards and the wind died utterly away, although a dull roar could be heard from ahead.

"Keep your mouths covered with your scarves, lads," cautioned Preston. "In single file. Use your staves for keeping contact. There'll be a sandstorm in a brace of shakes."

Then came the vanguard of the sandstorm, this time in almost exactly the opposite direction and full in the face of Preston and his companions. The moonlight faded completely, as suddenly as an electric lamp is switched off. Whirling clouds of gritty sand buffeted the trio, as with heads bent they floundered on a compass course in the direction where they hoped to find the airship, unless she was already torn from her moorings.

There was one redeeming feature about that sandstorm. The particles were not hot. Had it been day the sand would have been scorchingly hot. Nevertheless the conditions were quite enough to cause the three acute discomfort, to say nothing of apprehension.

Sand lashed their faces, clogged mouth and nostrils in spite of the slight protection afforded by their scarves. Their eyes too smarted. They had to keep

the lids closed; only their leader opened his eyes every minute or so to consult the luminous needle of the pocket compass. The others, linked together by their staves, stumbled blindly in Preston's wake, confident in his ability to guide them into safety.

They had lost all count of time and distance. All they could do was to flounder onwards, trusting that the *Explorer* had not been torn from her moorings and that their leader's compass course would not fail them.

Then came an ominous lull in the wind, followed by a terrific gust from a northerly direction. Without the compass that would have meant disaster to the three youths. Their natural instinct would have been to battle against the wind. The compass alone had warned Preston of the rapid change of direction.

They were now fighting their way, leaning to the left to counteract the hissings and blast. But for the connecting links of staves they must have been separated, since it was impossible to see more than a hand's breadth ahead.

Just as Peter was beginning to have doubts concerning the position of the airship he almost plunged head foremost into a hillock of sand that appeared to be, and probably was, on the move.

To save himself he stretched out his arm. His hand encountered the bilge of the *Explorer*.

She was moving—sliding or else swinging bodily under the terrific wind pressure—and she was moving towards Peter and his companions.

They were in danger of being "flattened out" as surely as if they were in the path of a tank.

To shout a warning to his companions would be useless. They could hear nothing except the roar of the wind through the scarves that enveloped their ears as well as their mouths and noses.

In a trice Preston turned and threw Barr at full length on the lee of the ridge of sand.

"Lie still and keep in touch!" he yelled, his mouth almost touching Barr's ear.

While Sinclair was wondering why the staff he was grasping had suddenly dipped Peter threw him down also and repeated the caution. Then he too lay at full length, face pillow'd on his left arm, and with his right still grasping the staff.

The ridge of sand to wind'ard was urged forward until they were buried to a depth of perhaps a foot as the airship swung slowly above. The slight protection afforded by this cushion of sand was sufficient to take the weight of the *Explorer*. Although the pressure was considerable Preston and his chums had the presence of mind to remain quiet until it was relaxed.

Then they knew that the airship had dragged over their frail shelter.

By dint of much struggling Preston succeeded in extricating himself from the sand. Then he assisted his chums to regain their feet.

Now came another occasion for Peter to make a quick decision. If the airship were merely swinging head to wind he would have to follow her up by

means of a compass course. If, on the other hand, she had broken from her mooring she would now be drifting "down wind", probably at a far greater rate than the three lads would be able to go unless the drag of the *Explorer's* under side was greater than might be expected.

Rapidly Preston made up his mind. His faith in the airship's steel mooring-cables, combined with the knowledge that the wind had been suddenly changing, told him that the only way to locate the *Explorer* was to follow a compass course that would eventually, he hoped, cut the arc described by the vessel swinging to the full scope of her cables.

By this time the wind had eased considerably, although the air was thick with dust. Progress, too, was easier on account of the surface of the sand having been smoothed and pressed down by the weight of the airship.

At last a faint pin-prick of light was visible through the suffocating dust. It was the *Explorer's* stern-light, forty feet above the ground and about twice that distance from the spot where Peter stood.

"There she is!" he yelled. "Stick it, lads!"

Summoning their remaining energies, though their feet seemed as heavy as lead and their breath was almost exhausted, the three struggled forward, reached the port quarter of the airship, and then groped their way until they gained the wire rope ladder to the entry-port.

Here they stopped, too utterly done up to manage  
(B 201)

114     The Secret of the Plateau

the climb of ten feet or more. To make matters worse the door had been closed, otherwise an enormous weight of sand would have found its way into the airship's hull.

With his staff Peter hammered upon the metal hull, but without result. Then, fumbling for the Verey pistol he contrived to insert a cartridge. Risking the danger of bursting the weapon, for sand in the barrel might easily cause that result, he pressed the trigger.

A vivid red glare lighted up the side of the *Explorer* and Preston's hand had not been shattered!

"They can't help seeing that blaze," he thought.

A few seconds later and the entry-port was opened. Two of the crew descended with bowlines and, as soon as possible, Preston and his two companions were hauled into safety.

"You all right, old son?" asked Mackie anxiously.

"Are you all right?" countered Peter.

"She's holding so far," resumed his chum.

"Then let her hold," rejoined the young Commander. "Wind's easing. For goodness' sake, Hugh, get us something to drink—quarts of it!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### Failure

Hugh Mackie refrained from questions while the three returned wanderers rested and refreshed. In spite of Peter's declaration they drank sparingly after they had rinsed the sand from their mouths. Cold water, even though it had been brought from England in the airship's tanks, was *taboo*. In no circumstances was anyone on board allowed to drink it until it had been well boiled, cooled, and then passed through a Doulton filter.

Meanwhile the airship continued to tremble under the strong though lessening wind-pressure. A constant watch on the compass showed that the vessel was riding fairly steadily and head to wind. In consequence it was known that she was riding to her moorings, otherwise she would have been swept broadside-on to lee'ard.

"That's better!" exclaimed Preston, putting down his pannikin.

"Whatever is that?" inquired Mackie, indicating the spear that Sinclair had managed to retain.

"That? Some sort of spear used by the natives of Zaghamedi, I fancy," answered Peter. "No, I don't

## 116 The Secret of the Plateau

think it was hurled at us, or even dropped on us purposely. Where's Mr. Tomayn? He might be able to give us some information about it."

Mackie gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Turned in," he replied briefly.

At a sign from the Commander Mackie followed him into his private cabin.

"What's the matter now?" inquired the former, realizing that Hugh had something to report which he did not want to say when others were within earshot.

"The miserable blighter!" burst forth Hugh. "He's afraid—afraid for his own rotten hide and ashamed to look you in the face! When the storm burst he declared that you three were sure to be done in, and implored me to slip the moorings and take the *Explorer* up."

"One could hardly blame you if you did," replied Peter soberly. "It was a case of risking many lives for the sake of three. If those cables hadn't held you wouldn't have stood an earthly chance."

"But they did," rejoined Mackie confidently.

"Then forget all about the fellow," counselled Preston. "He can't help being what he is. I won't mention the matter to him."

"That's all very well," continued Mackie, "but, unfortunately, Tomayn let himself go in front of most of the hands of the watch. There was a bit of a rumpus. They booed him out of it."

Peter looked grave. Although incensed, the men ought to have kept their feelings under control. Visions of a complaint to the directors of gross mis-

behaviour towards the charterer of the *Explorer* flashed across the Commander's mind. It was not only bad for discipline, but prejudicial to the best interests of the *Black Comet* Air Fleet.

"Don't worry, old bean!" exclaimed Hugh, when his chum expressed his misgivings. "Tomayn won't grouse. He'll be afraid to. In scientific circles he wants to be thought no end of a 'big noise', and he knows perfectly well that if the true facts of this incident come out he would be a back number. Now, what happened out there?"

Briefly Peter related what had occurred at the base of the plateau.

"We're up against a tough proposition," remarked Hugh. "There are not only physical difficulties, but danger from the natives to be taken into account."

"And from their point of view they cannot be blamed," said Peter. "Although Zaghamedi is technically a part of the British Empire—a small portion belongs to the French, of course—these people possibly are unaware of the existence of white men. They've never been conquered; no one outside knows anything about the place except from the aerial photographs taken from the Zeppelin. They will have their own history, traditions, language. If they are hostile we'll have to do our best to carry out our instructions and treat them in a friendly manner. But will that friendly manner work? However, we shall see, or I hope we shall. Our next job is to effect a landing on the plateau, and, my word! it's going to be a tough proposition."

## 118 The Secret of the Plateau

"But we'll do it!" declared Mackie.

Rarely was daybreak more welcome than when the rays of the rising sun gilded the crest of the plateau of Zaghamedi.

The wind had now died utterly away, leaving only sharply defined undulating tracks upon the sand almost as regular as those left by a plough in a newly-tilled field. The air was fresh and exhilarating, although in a few hours the temperature would be well above 120 degrees.

Although he had only been able to snatch a couple of hours' sleep, Peter Preston was at his post at the control station. A working-party had already gone out and dug up the two anchors that had so nobly stood up to the task demanded of them. The motors had been given a test and had proved to be satisfactory in spite of the sand that had inevitably found its way into the interior of the hull.

The young Commander was on the point of ordering the balloonets that had been deflated on the previous evening to be charged, when Sinclair happened to look upwards.

"There's the *Vorwärts*, sir!" he exclaimed. "Look! In line with this upright, sir!"

It was some time before Preston could "pick up" the object indicated. When he did he saw a fairly large airship standing westward at a height of about twelve or fifteen thousand feet. At that altitude she looked to the naked eye little larger than a grain of wheat.

"You've jolly good sight, Alec," declared Peter as he reached for a pair of binoculars. "Well, all I can say is that von Müller hasn't wasted much time over effecting repairs."

It was even more difficult for Preston to get the airship into the field of the glasses. When he did he exclaimed:

"She's not the *Vorwärts!* She's a French airship—the *Jeanne d'Arc* most likely. Now, what is she doing on a westerly course?"

No one present could offer a satisfactory explanation. Since the *Jeanne d'Arc* was known to be approaching Zaghamedi from the Sahara, and consequently making for that part of the plateau claimed as part of French Equatorial Africa, it was indeed puzzling why she should have now chosen the approach from the eastern side.

"She'll be there before us," declared Mackie.

"'Fraid so," agreed Preston. "She'll be over before we gain sufficient altitude. Stations! We won't get in her way, but if de Nonancourt spots us on the ground he'll think we've had a crash. I don't want him to come down to give us a hand when we aren't in need of assistance."

"I bet Tomayn wouldn't say that," thought Mackie. "A thundering good thing that fellow is still in his bunk."

Under the lift of her Crophelium-filled balloonets the *Explorer* rose rapidly to a height of eight thousand feet, or about two thousand below the corresponding

height of the plateau. So far she made no attempt to use her motors, and under the influence of a steady westerly air current she was drifting away from the table-mountain.

"We'll let her have first shot!" reiterated Peter. "This isn't a dash to the Pole. Hello! she's bumping a bit!"

Through his binoculars Preston watched the *Jeanne d'Arc*'s attempt, but after a brief interval he placed the glasses down. Although they gave him a clear and highly magnified view of the French airship they destroyed the idea of distance between him and the plateau. This was a factor which the young Commander had good reasons for observing with the naked eye.

Undoubtedly the *Jeanne d'Arc* was encountering eddies and air-pockets. She might be likened to a ship approaching a harbour bar against a weather going-tide. Not only was she rolling and pitching, but more than once she dropped almost vertically for several hundred feet.

"She's throwing out more ballast!" announced Mackie, who, unlike his chum, had continued to make use of his binoculars. "Look! That's no good; she's still dipping!"

At about a quarter of a mile from the plateau the French airship simply could not maintain altitude. Either the air was too rarefied or there was a tremendous air-pocket to contend with. She had now dropped to quite a thousand feet lower than the edge of the cliffs and, in spite of shedding more ballast and elevating

her horizontal rudders, she was unable to attain her objective.

After a quarter of an hour's effort she suddenly turned and flew away in a northerly direction without giving any indication of the fact that she had sighted the British airship, at one time only two miles off.

"Call her up, Dyson," ordered Preston. "Ask her what's wrong?"

But no reply came from the *Jeanne d'Arc*. De Nonancourt evidently had no desire to communicate with his British rival, since it was hardly to be believed that he had neither seen the *Explorer* nor picked up her powerful wireless signal.

"Now comes our star turn, Hugh," declared Peter. "We'll want every foot of altitude we can get to tackle that obstacle."

"We're good for thirty thousand feet anyway," remarked Hugh. "A thousand more than Mount Everest. That ought to do the trick!"

"We'll see: serve out an oxygen apparatus to each man. Tell Radcliff to stand by the heating system and keep the temperature above zero."

Mackie hurried off to give the unwelcome orders, for very high altitudes meant not only acute discomfort from the intense cold, but trouble with the respiratory organs in spite of the artificial use of oxygen.

Just then Tomayn entered the control-room in a decidedly diffident manner. He was doubtful of his reception by the high-spirited and often out-spoken young Commander. Having only a few hours pre-

122 The Secret of the Plateau

viously advocated abandoning Preston and his two companions to their fate, he was extremely embarrassed to have to explain his reasons to the principal character concerned.

But Peter ignored the incident.

"Hello, sir!" he exclaimed brightly. "Topping morning, what?"

"And I see we are about to land on the plateau," rejoined Tomayn. "I am only just in time, by Jove!"

"Plenty of time," corrected Preston. "We haven't gained altitude yet."

"But," insisted the astonished charterer, "we are already above the level of the tableland."

"Yes," agreed the Commander, "we are: but we aren't high enough yet—not by long chalks. Have you seen Mr. Mackie?"

"No, why?"

"He's serving out the oxygen gadgets," explained Preston. "We'll have to touch the thirty thousand feet limit before we attempt the descent."

"Why?"

"It's necessary," replied Peter shortly. There was no time for a detailed explanation. "You'd better get hold of your apparatus, Mr. Tomayn, before it's too late. Bleeding from the nose and ears isn't pleasant, and if you want to avoid those unpleasantnesses——"

The sight of two of the crew entering the control room equipped for the high altitude convinced Tomayn that "he'd better get a move on".

As soon as the charterer had gone, Preston donned

what he facetiously termed his "dog-muzzle". Then, putting on a fleece-lined fur coat and thick woollen gloves, he resumed his post at the instrument board.

Momentarily the temperature fell. At twenty-five thousand feet above sea-level, in spite of the electric stoves, the mercury had fallen to 40° F. Mist began to form on the plate-glass windows although they had recently been treated with a weak solution of spirits of wine and glycerine.

From that altitude a large part of the plateau of Zaghamedi, seven thousand feet below, could be seen like a gigantic map. It looked a simple matter for the *Explorer* to forge ahead and then descend upon this hitherto unexplored territory.

But Preston strenuously resisted the temptation. The *Jeanne d'Arc* had tried and had failed. Profiting by her example he meant to leave little to chance, but to gain the maximum possible height before essaying to cross the invisible barrier which by this time he felt certain did exist as a very formidable obstacle to success.

The British airship's ascent was now appreciably retarded. Preston expected this, for the higher she rose the slower was her upward progress in the rarefied atmosphere.

All balloonets were now charged to their maximum pressure consistent with that of the greatly diminished air pressure without. An excess of as little as five per cent might easily result in one or more of the balloonets bursting. Half a dozen might go without imperilling the lives of the crew. At most the *Explorer*

would dive through several thousand feet until the increased density of the atmosphere nearer the ground would be sufficient to stop her descent; but until repairs to the rent balloonets were effected another attempt to gain the summit of the plateau would be utterly out of the question.

Anxiously Preston watched the needle of the altimeter. Again and again he tapped the glass of the instrument in case the delicately-poised needle had stuck on account of the cold.

At twenty-eight thousand feet the *Explorer* had reached her limit of altitude. The thinness of the atmosphere prevented her gaining more. In spite of the remarkable buoyancy of the Crophelium gas the airship weighed exactly the same as the amount of rarefied air she displaced.

The moment for action had arrived.

Preston ordered half-speed ahead.

The eight propellers began to revolve, but, instead of moving forward with a decidedly perceptible jerk, the airship gathered way slowly and irresolutely.

The air was so thin that the broad-bladed propellers were meeting with very little resistance. Normally at half-speed they should be turning at 1200 revolutions; actually they were running at nearly twice that speed and yet moving the airship in a horizontal direction at about thirty miles an hour only.

For the present Preston dare not give the motors increased revolutions. They would simply rattle themselves out of their bearings or "seize up" owing to

the supply of sluggish oil being insufficient to lubricate efficiently the high-speed turbines.

Nevertheless in spite of a decided advance air current, the *Explorer* was approaching a position immediately over the plateau. In another few minutes—

Without warning, the airship's nose dipped. She began to plunge earthwards at a sharp angle. The crew were thrown violently against the for'ard bulkheads. Preston found himself in a position akin to that of "on all fours".

His first impression was that most of the balloonets for'ard of the 'midship section had burst and that the airship was diving to a terrific crash. He was aware that her motors were still running. If the engineers were yet at their posts—

By a praiseworthy acrobatic feat Peter managed to reach the engine-room telegraph lever and jerk it to the "full astern" position, in the hope that the *Explorer*'s downward plunge might be appreciably retarded under the reverse action of the eight propellers.

Long-drawn seconds passed, but the motors continued their rhythmic purr. No response came to the Commander's orders to the engine-room.

The *Explorer* had now dropped to about the same level as that of the plateau of Zaghamedi, but now her descent was being sharply retarded. Obviously she was not a dead weight, otherwise the force of gravity would have continuously increased the speed of her earthward fall.

Preston's first sensation akin to dizziness had now passed. His mind was working calmly. The sense of responsibility displaced all others. On him—on his actions—depended the fate of his companions.

The engineers had failed him. Perhaps it was not their fault. They might be lying stunned or even dead at their posts. But since the propellers were still running at half-speed there remained yet a chance, a desperate one, to regain control.

Tearing off the now unnecessary oxygen apparatus Preston, using Sinclair's shoulder as a sort of stepping-stone, contrived to move over the almost upright floor until he reached the lever operating the vertical rudders. They had stood up to the exacting tests imposed upon them during the airship's trial flight; would they respond equally well now?

As Peter grasped the handle his feet slipped and his whole weight was thrown upon the actuating lever.

There he hung, waiting—waiting either for the annihilating crash or the reassuring recovery of the airship's trim.

She turned completely on her major axis, hurling most of her crew first against the side and then against the roof, before "flattening out" in an almost normal position.

Fortunately Preston was able to retain his hold on the lever and on that account saved himself from being flung against the bulkhead.

Regaining his feet he glanced through the now unobscured observation window.

The *Explorer* was heading approximately east, or away from the plateau, and had increased her horizontal speed to about eighty miles an hour. The altimeter registered a height of five thousand feet.

"Why isn't she circling?" thought Peter, remembering that he had pulled the lever controlling the vertical rudders hard over.

By a sheer slice of good luck he must have unconsciously thrust the lever back to the fore and aft position and now the airship was flying practically automatically.

And she was also fleeing from the as yet unconquered plateau!

Zaghamedi was now twenty miles astern, and the *Explorer* was steadily increasing the distance.

"This won't do," decided Preston.

Deliberately he threw out the emergency switch that cut off the radio-electrical current to the turbines.

The propeller ceased to revolve. The airship, again nothing but a non-dirigible balloon, was soon drifting slowly over the arid plain.

Peter was now free to attend to his companions in the control-room. Hugh, his face cut and bruised as the result of his oxygen apparatus being flattened between his head and the bulkhead, was otherwise little the worse for his experience.

He assisted Peter in seeing to the others.

Sinclair was somewhat dazed as the result of slight concussion, and had sustained a nasty cut just above his left knee. Of the two quartermasters one was

unconscious, while the other had received a simple fracture of the right arm.

While Preston and Mackie were rendering first aid Dyson appeared upon the scene. He was unhurt, but his chief concern was the fact that he had to report serious damage to the wireless gear.

"That can wait, old son," declared Peter. "Nip aft and see what's wrong in the motor-room."

In a few minutes Dyson returned and reported that the two engineers on duty were only slightly injured and were trying to find the reason for the apparent failure of the turbine mechanism, as they were unaware that the emergency switch had been brought into action. They had received the telegraphic order for "full astern", but owing to the acute dip they were unable to reach the controlling mechanism.

Curiously enough, personal injuries had been confined to the control- and motor-rooms. The rest of the crew had got off with slight bruises, while Tomayn, who had barked his shins against his cabin trunk, made more fuss over his trivial hurt than did all the other injured combined.

"Now what's to be done, old son?" inquired Mackie.

"Done? Effect necessary repairs and have another shot at the jolly old plateau," declared Preston resolutely.

## CHAPTER XIV

### The Second Attempt

"Good!" exclaimed Hugh admiringly. "But, honestly, Peter, what do you think forced us down? Have the inhabitants of Zaghamedi means of controlling certain forces of nature?"

"Hardly," replied Preston. "It seems to me that the place is surrounded, or nearly so, by a tremendous air pocket."

"Why nearly so?"

"Because that Zeppelin succeeded in passing over it without being forced down. She went north, you'll remember. We tried on the eastern side. Yes, there's a natural air defence. I believe it's due to the heated air of the desert ascending the sheer wall of rock and meeting with a correspondingly cold down-draught. At any rate, there's a partial vacuum rising vertically on this side of the plateau and extending far above the climbing limit of the *Explorer*. We'll anchor at four hundred feet while we effect repairs and pull ourselves together, as it were. Then we'll try the south side."

Once more the propellers were set in motion and the airship brought back to within two miles of the

plateau, but on its southern face. Here a grapnel was lowered and before the *Explorer* had drifted very far the metal prongs engaged firmly in an outcrop of sandstone.

Riding easily at the desired height above the desert, the interior of the airship was restored to a state of order and her crew fed and rested before attempting a second attack upon the mysterious forces of nature that girt the forbidding plateau.

Viewed from the *Explorer's* new position Zaghamedi presented a similar appearance to that of its eastern front, merely a sheer wall of granite rising to a height of ten or more thousand feet above the surrounding desert.

There were no signs of inhabitants, but again there were those unexplainable torrents of water that ceased their fall half-way between the summit and base of the cliffs, but only during the hours of daylight.

While most of his companions slept, Dyson, the wireless operator, worked unceasingly at his apparatus, and after seven hours' toil succeeded in getting the set to function.

"Base calling, sir!" he reported triumphantly.  
"They want to know the reason for our silence."

"Tell them we're O.K.," replied Peter. "That will be enough for the present."

Hardly had Dyson sent off the reply when the *Jeanne d'Arc* was reported approaching from the east'ard.

This time de Nonancourt appeared to be anxious

to communicate with his British rivals. The reason was not far to seek, for only two of the French airship's propellers were working. She was descending to earth and searching for a suitable landing-ground within easy distance of the *Explorer*.

She bumped rather badly on alighting. Half a dozen men leapt from the *nacelles*, each holding on to a rope, to the extremity of which was attached an empty canvas sack. These the landing-party proceeded to fill at feverish speed until the airship was thus tethered to Mother Earth.

The Commandant de Nonancourt, a short stockily-built man dressed in a white uniform and wearing a sun-helmet, alighted and, holding a megaphone to his lips, hailed the *Explorer*.

"*Salut, Monsieur le Capitaine!*" he shouted. "Is it that you can oblige with a few litres of *essence*?"

"What does he mean?" inquired Peter. "Essence? This isn't a perfumery."

It was Tomayn who supplied the explanation.

"That's what the French call petrol," he replied.

"I'm sorry, monsieur," megaphoned Peter, "but we haven't any."

"None? *Mais non?* How comes it that you are capable of ze motion? *Les moteurs*, zey mus' have ze essence, *n'est-ce pas?*!"

"He hasn't heard of our radio-electric propulsion, Hugh!" exclaimed Preston. "Strange!"

"He wants educating, old son," observed Mackie.

"We are sorry," reiterated Peter. "If we had some

132 The Secret of the Plateau

to spare we would let you have it. We don't carry any. If you care to come on board—we'll descend for that purpose—you can see for yourself. Have you enough petrol to take you to Khartum? There is plenty there."

"It would be ver' great *plaisir* to make your acquaintance, Monsieur *le Capitaine*," declared de Nonancourt.

"Disbelieving bounder!" muttered Tomayn.

"All the same we'll probably hear how he got on," said Peter. "He's come off worse than we did. Empty odd-numbered balloonets."

In a few minutes the *Explorer*, still held by her cable and grapnel, descended gently to the hot sand. The ladder to the entry-port was lowered and de Nonancourt, accompanied by another officer, came on board.

Introductions followed, then Tomayn produced a bottle of whisky, apologizing handsomely to the Frenchman that he had not any of his native wines on board.

Then de Nonancourt was shown over the airship and given a demonstration of how the turbines were run. Although convinced that Preston's statement was correct he could not overcome his astonishment that the propelling machinery was not of the internal-combustion type.

"And what happened to you?" asked Preston, after he had given the Frenchman an account of the *Explorer*'s failure.

"It was terrible!" exclaimed de Nonancourt. "Two times I make ze attempt. It was as if la *Jeanne d'Arc* made encounter with a *camouflet*—a land-mine, mon-

sieur. We mount high—no good! We descend in spite of ourselves. We try on ze French side; we try on ze side belonging to ze English. Impossible! Nevertheless to-morrow we return to ze attack from ze *sud*—ze south you call it."

"Short of petrol?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"Assuredly, monsieur! Still we have enough for perhaps three hours. We arrive at Zaghamedi or perish."

"Would it not be better to refill your tanks at Khartum and then make the attempt? Or you won't be able to return if you reach the plateau," suggested Tomayn.

Again de Nonancourt shrugged his shoulders and extended his hands, palms uppermost.

"*Non, non, monsieur!*" he protested. "We are content to arrive. After—it matters not. We can drift away as a balloon."

"He's got grit, that Frenchman," remarked Preston, after de Nonancourt had gone. "He means to get there at all costs and never mind the consequences. Well, jolly good luck to him; but it won't be our fault if we don't land in Zaghamedi before him."

Preston had decided to make his second attempt on the following day; but, now that the spirit of friendly rivalry had been fanned into a fierce flame by the proximity of the Gallic airship, he changed his mind and gave orders for the *Explorer* to essay the crossing as soon as repairs were effected.

He had reckoned without the impetuosity of the mercurial de Nonancourt. Eager to uphold the prestige of the French Air Service, and utterly regardless of what might happen after he had effected a landing upon the table-mountain, de Nonancourt took the *Jeanne d'Arc* up, notwithstanding the fact that two motors were out of action.

"Surely he isn't going to have a shot at it in that condition?" remarked Preston, as the French airship, rising rapidly and almost vertically, passed two hundred yards away from the still-anchored *Explorer*.

"That's what the fellow is doing, confound him!" exclaimed Tomayn furiously. "He's stolen a march on us. Now, if you hadn't wasted time—why haven't we started earlier?"

Fortunately Preston pretended to ignore the sneering implication. Watching the progress of the *Jeanne d'Arc* was preferable to listening to Tomayn's ill-chosen words.

While the French airship was climbing, Mackie kept checking her altitude by means of his sextant. It was a rough-and-ready calculation, since it depended upon the *Jeanne d'Arc* keeping to a constant vertical ascent, or nearly so, but it enabled Peter to be informed of the approximate height his rival attained before essaying his dive upon the top of the plateau.

"She's stopped at eighteen thousand feet!" declared Mackie.

"Then I reckon she won't do it," rejoined Peter, who, lying on his back as a better posture than standing

and bending his neck, was watching the French airship through his binoculars. "There she goes! Four of her props are revolving."

The *Jeanne d'Arc* was making slow progress in a horizontal direction, or at least she appeared to be moving slowly. Possibly the altitude gave the observers this impression, or, as had been the case with the *Explorer*, her propellers were not at all efficient in the rarefied air.

She was now steering north. Her yellow envelope loomed transparently against the clear tropical sky, except where the suspended nacelles showed black like the backbone of a fish. Right aft a tricolour stood out stiffly in the breeze of the airship's own creation.

Then, as Preston had expected, the *Jeanne d'Arc* ran blindly into the mysterious air-pocket or downward current of cold air, whichever it might be.

She dropped like a stone, but, unlike the *Explorer* in her uncontrollable fall, she kept more or less on an even keel. No doubt the suspended nacelles tended to preserve her trim.

Through his binoculars Peter could see the crew hurriedly throwing out sand ballast. In spite of the terrific descent they had kept their presence of mind sufficiently to enable them to think and act.

Lightening the French airship by these means was of no avail. Down she dropped, well below the level of the summit of Zaghamedi, with four of her propellers revolving at full speed.

Then again, without warning, a sort of counter blast

of air struck her, swept her at least a mile from the face of the cliff until she was almost above the anchored British airship.

Here, apparently, normal air conditions prevailed. The *Jeanne d'Arc*, lightened of all ballast, shot up with great rapidity until she regained and exceeded her former maximum altitude. But all to no purpose; she was farther from her objective than before.

Her propellers ceased to revolve. Strict economy was necessary as far as her petrol consumption was concerned.

Presently she commenced to descend, owing, it afterwards transpired, to the involuntary release of gas from one of her balloonets.

An hour later she came to rest within a quarter of a mile of the stationary *Explorer*.

"Well, do you think we can do better than that?" asked Tomayn.

"We'll try anyway," replied Preston, although, in the knowledge that the south face of the plateau presented similar atmospheric difficulties to those of the eastern side, he realized that Zaghamedi was a very tough nut to crack.

The grapnel was broken out and hauled inboard. Again the supplementary balloonets were charged and the *Explorer* rose for her second attempt.

This time Preston tried different tactics. At an altitude of twenty thousand feet he trimmed the horizontal rudders until the airship was tilted, bows up, at an angle of thirty degrees. Then at full speed he

charged the danger zone, hoping that the resultant force would carry the *Explorer* through the air pocket and over the edge of the plateau.

It was a magnificent and hazardous attempt. It all but succeeded, but not quite.

The brink of the towering cliffs was within two or three hundred feet of the still obliquely-inclined airship when Peter realized that so rapid was his descent that she was in imminent peril of crashing into the natural wall of granite.

Warned at all costs to remain within reach of their reverse levers, the engineers promptly responded to the Commander's order for "Full astern starboard!"

A brief instant of suspense followed. Was the air sufficiently dense for the four starboard propellers to get a grip as they altered their direction of rotation?

Then the motors proved their worth.

Round swung the *Explorer* almost on her own axis, until her bows pointed away from the cliffs. She was still falling vertically and so rapidly that the fissures on the face of the cliff appeared to be shooting upwards at stupendous speed.

"Full ahead, starboard!" signalled Preston, to prevent the airship making a complete revolution.

Away darted the *Explorer*, still dropping as she increased her distance from the sheer face of the plateau. Then, caught by an eddy, she whirled like a falling leaf, until she gained the normal stratum of air that had saved the *Jeanne d'Arc* from destruction.

More highly powered and easier in point of man-

138    The Secret of the Plateau

œuvring, the *Explorer* alighted, a quarter of an hour later, almost breast of her rival.

"Well?" queried Tomayn. "Not much of a performance for a crack airship, is it? If a Zeppelin did it years ago when airships weren't what they are now, why can't we? Tell me that?"

## CHAPTER XV

### “Three for Luck”

Commander Peter Preston was not one to offer excuses to explain away his failure. Nor could he hazard any explanation why the Zeppelin had succeeded in flying over Zaghamedi, and the better-engined and equipped *Explorer* had twice attempted and had failed.

“We'll have another go at it to-morrow,” he announced. “The hands require rest and sleep.”

About an hour before sunset Preston, accompanied by Mackie, returned de Nonancourt's visit. Tomayn declined to go, giving as an excuse that he was tired.

At the entry-port of the 'midship nacelle of the *Jeanne d'Arc* they were met and welcomed by the French airmen. Mutual expressions of admiration for each other's efforts after initial failure, and condolences that their respective airships had not succeeded, were exchanged.

“You will not have enough petrol, monsieur, for another attempt, I fear,” remarked Peter, “unless, of course, you procure supplies at Khartum.”

“*Mon ami,*” replied de Nonancourt, “we have yet enough to take us over Zaghamedi.”

140    The Secret of the Plateau

"It has been puzzling me why the German Zeppelin succeeded during the War," continued Preston.

"I also am perplexed," agreed the Frenchman. "I am desolate to think that a Boche has succeeded when we fail."

"And there's another German airship attempting the task," Peter remarked.

"*Nom d'un cochon!*" ejaculated de Nonancourt. "Do I need reminding of that?"

The fury of the Frenchman's tone made Peter ponder. He recalled Captain Starlight's warning. At all costs he must prevent differences between the French and German airmen.

"We are not likely to be troubled by the *Vorwärts*, monsieur," he said. "She is disabled. We took her in tow and left her at Khartum."

De Nonancourt's anger evaporated. Chivalry, especially the chivalry of the air, was part and parcel of his character. Although he disliked Germans as a nation, he was genuinely concerned at the news of von Müller's mishap.

"I would not like to be forestalled by the *Vorwärts*," he observed, "yet it is to be deplored that we have one rival the less."

"*Mon Capitaine!*" shouted one of the *Jeanne d'Arc*'s crew, "*Mon Capitaine! Voici la Vorwärts qui arrive!*"

"*Ciel!*" ejaculated de Nonancourt, rushing to the entry-port.

His guests followed, anxious to see the approaching German airship.

She was flying at a height of about five thousand feet, her course being approximately south and parallel with the eastern face of the plateau. She had just cleared the south-eastern angle and had swung her bows west'ard.

Without attempting to decrease altitude or speed she flew almost above her rivals and then disappeared in a westerly direction.

"She's circumnavigating the table-mountain before she attempts to cross it," declared Peter to his chum; then he turned to de Nonancourt:

"It will soon be dark, monsieur," he continued. "With your permission we will take our departure."

"I say, old son!" observed Mackie, as the two were on their way back to the *Explorer*. "You're getting as polite as that Frenchman."

"Well, why shouldn't I?" rejoined Preston. "Perhaps I unconsciously adopted his style."

"And yet you hurried off."

"I did," admitted the Commander. "I did! I have an inspiration!"

"What?"

"Wait till I've had an opportunity to confirm it. By Jove, I think I've hit it!"

Directly the chums regained the *Explorer* both went straight to Preston's private cabin.

Peter switched on the light and from a drawer in the kneehole desk produced a bundle of photographs of Zaghamedi taken from the Zeppelin.

"Here's the first one taken," he remarked. "On

the margin it states that the plate was exposed two hours after the Zeppelin crossed the southern edge of the plateau. The remaining eleven were taken at half-minute intervals."

"Well, and what does that prove?"

"That the Zeppelin had covered at least a hundred miles before the first photograph was taken."

"Proceed, Sherlock!"

"Take this magnifying-glass and examine the print! Look at the shadows! Hugh, my festive, this photograph was taken a few minutes after sunrise."

"Now I think I know what you are driving at," remarked Mackie. "The Zeppelin must have crossed over the rim of the plateau during the night."

"Exactly! At night! After the desert sands have radiated the sunlight they absorbed during the day. The strong downward air current, or counter-eddy would be a better way to describe it, does not exist during the latter part of the night, or if it does it is only a comparatively slow one."

"Good!" exclaimed Hugh, animated by his chum's enthusiasm. "Three for luck! When do we start?"

"To-night," replied Peter. "It's only one day over the full moon. Come on! I'll muster the crew. If they are willing we'll ascend."

The crew, when appealed to, were equally enthusiastic. Although they were going to be deprived of a needed night's sleep they were unanimous in their desire to attempt the flight. Even the taciturn Tomayn's face beamed when he heard their decision.

"I propose starting the attempt at 3 a.m.," continued the Commander. "At that hour the moon will be overhead. Hands will fall in at four; so you can have six hours' sleep between now and breakfast."

Yielding to Mackie's appeal Preston "turned-in", leaving Barr as officer of the watch and three of the crew as look-outs. These were to be off duty when the rest of the hands were called.

But Peter had a hard job to fall asleep. For hours he lay awake thinking—thinking—

"It's rotten for me and not fair to the crew," he thought. "I'll be in a pretty jumpy state when the time comes."

Then he dropped into a sound slumber, never waking until he felt a hand on his shoulder and Hugh's voice saying:

"Time, old son. It's two in the morning. Three for luck, you know!"

Tumbling out of his bunk, Preston dressed, gratefully drank a cup of hot coffee and ate a couple of beef-essence sandwiches.

Then he went to the control-room where Barr, alert even after his double watch, reported all well.

"Glass steady and no wind, sir," he added.

Reports from the motor-room showed that all was in readiness in the mechanics' department. The grapnel was weighed; all movable articles securely stowed. In the navigation room all lights were extinguished except that of a six-volt lamp over the control board. Without, the moonlight was almost bright as day.

144 The Secret of the Plateau

Right ahead the formidable granite cliffs looked cold and forbidding in the silvery light.

Up rose the airship, turning in huge spirals with the additional lift imparted by her propellers combined with the action of both vertical and horizontal planes.

At three thousand feet higher than the plateau Preston steadied the *Explorer* on her helm. Such was his confidence in the non-existence of baffling air currents at this time of the night that he had refrained from gaining the previous high altitudes which had not made for success.

Mackie, glancing at the altimeter, wondered at his chum's temerity; yet, confident in Peter's judgment, he made no remark. Nevertheless he gripped a hand-rail tightly in anticipation of a sudden and severe bump if and when the *Explorer* struck the dangerous air pocket.

Presently Peter turned his head.

"We're over, old thing!" he announced calmly.  
"Ring down for quarter-speed, will you?"

Mackie could hardly realize the situation. So easily, so quickly had the successful attempt been completed that it seemed too good to be true.

Then, enthusiasm carrying him away, he thumped Preston between the shoulder-blades.

"Three for luck!" he exclaimed. "Well, we're here: what next?"

## CHAPTER XVI

# The Land of Fire

"We must find a suitable landing-place," replied Preston. "But before we do so there's one matter that must be attended to. You might tell Dyson to report our arrival *over* Zaghamedi, and say that we shall not be in a position to send out further radio messages for some days."

Mackie was hurrying to give the wireless operator his instructions when Peter called him back.

"We needn't play the dog-in-the-manger," he observed. "When Dyson has sent off the report will you get him to signal both the *Jeanne d'Arc* and the *Vorwärts*. Inform them that we have succeeded, and that they will find no difficulty if they make the attempt between 3 a.m. and dawn."

Presently Dyson reported that the radio message had been acknowledged. The trailing aerial was then wound in and the *Explorer* prepared to descend.

Through their night-glasses Peter and Hugh scanned the ground, now only a thousand feet below them, although the altimeter registered 16,500 feet above sea-level. So bright was the moonlight that it was possible to distinguish isolated trees and bushes. There

were tracks that must be artificially constructed road but apart from these there were no signs of human habitation or occupation. Apparently the native favoured other parts of the tableland—distinct evidence of that had already been seen by the *Explorer's* crew—or else, terrified by the appearance of a huge unknown object overhead, they had taken shelter in caves and under the trees.

"Think that will do?" asked Peter, indicating a broad winding stretch of water that looked more like a long narrow lake than a river.

"Why not?" rejoined Mackie. "If we lie afloat in the centre we can command a clear view of the shores. There's less chance of the natives making a surprise attack, if there are any about here and they are that way inclined."

"Clear away both anchors," ordered the Commander.

For the first time during the voyage the airship was about to alight upon the surface of the water. In these circumstances the grapnel would be less efficacious than the two stockless anchors normally stowed away for'ard under the navigation room.

While the gear was being prepared Peter was able to reflect upon the events of the last few minutes. What a simple task it had been after all. The formidable natural barriers against which the relatively puny airship had pitted her strength twice and without avail had just vanished, merely because the successful attempt had been made at the right moment. He was too modest to admit, even in his own mind, that the

enterprise was also due to his powers of observation and capacity to think things out.

"Anchors shackled, sir!" reported the leading hand.  
"Cables ranged ready to pay out."

Roused from his reverie, Preston began to take the airship down towards the silvery streak on which she was to rest.

Alternate balloonets, port and starboard, were exhausted. Careful manœuvring with the propellers held the airship in position over her objective.

Then, since there was no appreciable breeze, she alighted without a splash, although as her underbody touched the surface ripples spread far and wide.

"Let go starboard!" ordered the Commander.

The anchor in question was dropped. Fathom after fathom of coir cable was paid out as the *Explorer* under the reverse action of her after propellers gathered sternway. Nor did she stop until 1200 feet of rope separated her from her anchor. The port anchor was then dropped. Directly it touched bottom the starboard cable was hove-in until the airship was moored at mid-distance between the two.

"Now we're all serene," declared Mackie. "We've won at any rate."

"Beg pardon, sir," announced one of the hands, as he emerged from the cable flat under the navigation room. "But would you mind looking below. The water has a peculiar smell, judging by what the coir rope smells like."

Preston, complying, had no need to make a complete

K.L.D. COLLEGE  
SRINAGAR  
ACC. NO. ....

## 148 The Secret of the Plateau

descent to the floor of the flat. As he put his head below the circular coaming of the hatchway a familiar odour assailed his nostrils.

It was that of petrol or of some combustible liquid akin to it.

Without saying a word to alarm those in the navigation room Peter took down a canvas bucket, bent a line to it, and lowered it overside from one of the now-open observation windows.

Hoisting the bucket the Commander smelt the iridescent liquid. It was petroleum!

"No rest for the present, lads," he announced. "We'll have to up-killick and that smartly. We've settled on a lake of petroleum."

All who heard him realized the danger and the need for an ascent without delay. If there were natives in the vicinity and they were of a hostile disposition all they had to do was to fire the inflammable oil and the fate of the *Explorer* and her crew would be a foregone conclusion. That they knew its combustible nature there could be no doubt; and Preston now knew that the torrent of liquid fire which had forced the miserable victims over the edge of the plateau was either an overflow from this lake or else a runaway of a similar nature.

Both anchors were broken out, but no immediate attempt was made to haul in the petroleum-saturated cables. To have done so would mean introducing more inflammable gas into the interior of the airship.

Under the lift of two additional balloonets the *Explorer*

rose almost vertically, her anchors trailing far below her blunt bows.

"We're safer here, by Jove!" exclaimed Mackie. "When de Nonancourt arrives he won't be short of *essence*, that is, if the flash-point of that stuff is low enough."

"It would probably do if his motors were properly warmed up," suggested Peter. "I remember when my old motor-bike konked out—no petrol—and all I could get at a cottage was a pint of paraffin. That took me to the nearest garage right enough. Oh, by the by, ask Dyson to wireless von Müller and de Nonancourt and warn them against alighting on the lake. Sorry to have to trouble him to lower the aerial, you know."

But the operator was not one to make more work for himself than necessary. Owing to the relatively short distance between the *Explorer* and the two foreign airships he obtained perfect radio communication merely by stretching a length of insulated wire across the roof of the wireless cabin and using that as an aerial.

Within the space of five minutes affirmatives were received both from the *Vorwärts* and the *Jeanne d'Arc*. Both commanders expressed their thanks for the information and warning, but, somewhat to Preston's surprise, only von Müller offered his congratulations on the *Explorer* being the first to achieve the common objective.

"You're horribly tired, old son," declared Mackie,

noticing the drawn expression on Peter's face. "Why not turn in? I'll carry on. I feel quite fresh—really I do."

So Preston capitulated.

"I think I must," he admitted. "Keep her two thousand feet up. Don't anchor. When you think that the cables are free from petroleum fumes get them inboard and coiled away. But don't hurry; make sure they are perfectly dry first."

Left in charge, Hugh Mackie saw that the altimeter registered the required height; then, noticing that there was a slight but distinct "drift" in a northerly direction, he ordered the for'ard pair of propellers to be started and kept at a low rate of revolution, sufficient to counteract the air current.

"Wonder if de Nonancourt will have a shot at it to-night?" he pondered, as he swept the southern rim of the plateau with his night-glasses. "He'll have to be sharp about it or he'll be too late. It will be dawn in another couple of hours. What then? Will the tableland be swept by a terrific wind such as we encountered on our first two attempts?"

If the *Jeanne d'Arc* had made the effort she had not yet succeeded in showing her silver-corded body above the edge of Zaghamedi. Nor did she again attempt to get into radio communication with the British airship.

Carefully scanning the ground, still flooded in brilliant moonlight, Mackie could see no signs of human beings nor of any sort of animal life. The

terrain, freely crossed by waterways and pitted with small craters, looked more like an enlarged photograph of the moon's visible surface than of an expanse of land in tropical Africa. Yet there were people there. They must be very unobservant not to notice the airship floating in the cloudless sky a mere two thousand feet above the ground.

Presently Mackie glanced at the clock on the bulkhead. An hour passed since he had "taken over". The hands of the duty watch were called to heave in both cables.

Going below to the cable flat Mackie superintended the operation. Although the coir reeked faintly it was no longer a source of potential danger to the ship.

In spite of the assistance of a small electrically driven capstan the hauling up of the cable took the best part of half an hour. In fact the starboard anchor had not been taken in through the oval aperture provided for that purpose when one of the look-out men announced:

"Airship in sight, sir."

Mackie hurried back to the observation cabin. He was just in time to see the *Vorwärts* passing underneath.

The German airship was flying low in a nor'easterly direction. She was proceeding with caution, her speed by Hugh's reckoning being about thirty miles an hour. There were people on her observation platform on the upper surface of her envelope. She was displaying her navigation lights and in addition several of her port-holes were a blaze of light. Yet she appeared to take

152 The Secret of the Plateau

no notice of the *Explorer*. Probably her crew were too intent upon studying the nature of the moonlit terrain to pay heed to the stationary airship more than fifteen hundred feet above her.

Suddenly a blinding flame of fire leapt from one of the lakes. In a few moments the whole surface was a mass of flames, deep red like those of a heath fire. A few seconds later another conflagration sprang up from a lake a mile or so away from the first. Then another and another until over a huge area the plateau was pitted with enormous oil-fed furnaces.

It could only be attributed to concerted action on the part of the natives of Zaghamedi. This was but one of the natural defences of this unknown land, where lakes of highly inflammable oil existed, ready to be transformed into raging infernos at the first alarm.

Now there could be no doubt of the origin of the fires, for dark forms could be seen rushing from the scenes of their activity. Some cast torches from them as they ran. Mackie wondered how they had contrived to conceal their flambeaux until the time for firing the lakes. Others, shielding their heads from the intense heat, disappeared into the crater-like holes with which the ground abounded.

Even a hurried examination through his binoculars told Hugh that these were not the ordinary type of native inhabiting the Sudan, Darfur, and adjoining territories. They had not the frizzy hair and the almost ebony skins of these denizens of the desert. They were of a light coppery hue, even allowing for the

reddish glare of the flames. Their clothing, too, covered much of their bodies, and instead of being white like that of most Arab tribes was of a heavy dark texture. This was probably owing to the fact that the high tableland had a temperature far below that of the surrounding desert.

But Mackie's chief concern was for the *Vorwärts*. She had been seen flying at about five hundred feet. Now she was no longer to be seen.

The heat from the burning lake was beginning to make itself felt at the *Explorer*'s height. Under the continued action of the increased temperature of the Crophelium gas and the upward draught of abnormally heated air, the airship automatically gained altitude.

The scene below was one of fiery grandeur. More and more pools had been lighted until the lakelets of burning oil stretched as far as the eye could reach. The whole extent of the enormous plateau seemed a field of fire, while nearer the *Explorer* those conflagrations that had started first were now topped by dense clouds of black oily smoke.

"There's the German, sir!" exclaimed a look-out man, pointing in a direction where Mackie would have least expected to find the *Vorwärts*.

Admirably handled, she had just emerged through a tall pillar of smoke. She was gaining altitude rapidly and at the same time increasing speed.

"She'll ram us if she isn't careful," thought Mackie, as he sprang to the telegraph to order "full ahead, all engines".

But his fears were needless. Von Müller, at the helm of his airship, had sighted his rival as the *Vorwärts* drew clear of the blinding smoke.

He dived smartly, passing so close underneath the *Explorer's* hull that the British airship rolled and pitched in the eddies in the wake of the Teutonic craft.

Then, making a sixteen-point turn, the *Vorwärts* shot several thousand feet into the air and settled down on a nor'westerly course. In a few minutes she was lost to sight in the thick haze that hovered above the flames.

A moment or so later Barr, fully dressed, entered the cabin.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, catching sight of Mackie. "Where are we? Over Tierra del Fuego? It seems like it. The jolly old glare through the scuttle woke me up."

"We're all right," declared Hugh.

"That's good. Where's the skipper?"

"Sound asleep, at least I hope so," was the reply. "I ought by rights to have roused him and reported what's taken place. Somehow I couldn't; he looked so dead beat. Look here, Barr; I'm left in charge, but I want advice—badly."

"Have mine for what's it's worth," rejoined that worthy brightly.

"Well, it's this: in a few minutes it will be dawn. We're much higher than we should be but for those johnnies setting the oil on fire. Mind you, I think I

should have done the same if I had been in their place: seeing two big airships overhead and not knowing what they were."

"Two airships?"

"Yes, two. The *Vorwärts* passed going nor'-west a little while ago. But that's not the point. We're well up. Dawn is upon us. When the sun rises there will be a furious down current of air on all sides of the plateau. We know that by experience."

"We do," agreed Barr feelingly.

"Well then," continued Mackie. "What's to be done? We can't descend because of the fires; if we attempt to remain here we may be swept over the edge and forced down."

Barr thought for a few moments, then:

"Make for the centre of the plateau, as the *Vorwärts* has done. A hundred to one you'll find a belt of flat calm."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Mackie. "I'll do it—on my own responsibility mind."

"If anything goes wrong," remarked Barr, gazing down at the flames, "if anything goes wrong there won't be any of us left to argue about that."

## CHAPTER XVII

### A Warm Reception

"Course nor'-west," ordered Mackie. "Keep present altitude. Speed sixty."

The *Explorer* swung and steadied on the given course. "Steadied" was hardly a correct term, since she pitched considerably owing to the disturbed state of the heated air.

Presently Tomayn joined the group in the navigation room. He was in pyjamas with a heavy fur coat over all. His legs were encased in rubber knee-boots. His face was partly hidden by a smoke apparatus that had gone somewhat awry.

"Gracious!" he exclaimed. "What's up? I thought we were on fire."

"No need for the muzzle, Mr. Tomayn," said Mackie. "Here's the place you've come to survey. Now what about it?"

Tomayn went to the starboard observation window and surveyed the expanse of liquid flames.

"Splendid!" he ejaculated.

"Splendid?" echoed Mackie.

It was indeed a fine spectacle, but one that did not lend itself to aerial survey.

"Of course," continued the scientist. "Of course! Why, man, it's a discovery beyond my wildest dreams! The whole country is a vast oil-bed. There's enough mineral oil to knock the oil combine into a cocked hat. Yes, by Jove! I can see petrol being sold in London at sixpence a gallon and at a good profit at that."

"But the whole place is burning," observed Mackie. "Flaming oil isn't a commercial proposition."

Tomayn, in better temper than he had been before since the voyage started, rubbed his hands gleefully.

"You wait!" he exclaimed. "You wait! That's only residue. The sources haven't been tapped. They're all right."

"What about von Müller?" asked Barr. "He's here too."

Tomayn's jaw dropped.

"Here too? Where? Where?"

"We were here first in any case," observed Hugh.

"You noted that in the log? Good! Got the exact time? Where's the log? Let me sign the entry too. *Mein Gott!*" unconsciously he lapsed into German. "That von Müller is a crafty fellow. He wants watching. Let me sign that log!"

Leaving Tomayn to carry out his intention, Mackie and Barr remained at the observation window.

Dawn was just breaking. There were but a few seconds between moonlit night and the rising of the sun. At one moment the moon, now well down in the west, was throwing her steely rays athwart the ruddy tinged clouds of smoke well beneath the speed-

ing airship. Thirty seconds later and the moon had vanished, beaten into obscurity by the brilliant rays of the sun as he leapt above the eastern horizon.

Almost as quickly the vast field of conflagration underwent a transformation. The roaring patches of deep red fires gave way to a series of billowing sheets of pale flame topped by rapidly drifting clouds of smoke in all shades from deep black through grey to almost pure white.

With the rising of the sun a stiff breeze had sprung up that promised to develop into a hard if not fierce head wind.

"We'll whack her up to eighty," decided Mackie. "My word! Tomayn's right: the flames are dying down. The oil's burning itself out. Jove! That was a yawn! I *am* tired; there's no getting away from it. See anything of the *Vorwärts* yet?"

Barr, glasses glued to his eyes, looked ahead.

"Not yet," he replied. "But there's a big clearing. It's still about forty miles away; but unless I'm mistaken there is a big town of sorts."

"Eh?" ejaculated Hugh sharply. "Where? I can't see it."

"A little on the port bow," replied his companion. "There! The sun's shining on the houses now."

"You're dead right, James!" agreed Mackie. "I can see them now. And look! There's von Müller's pantechnicon. She's brought up this side of the place. My error! She's still moving. We'd better get Old Peter out or he'll be peeved! Smith!"

"Sir?"

"Youngsters like you should be in their beds at this time of the morning, or, at least, getting out of them."

"Sorry, sir," said the former stowaway. "But I couldn't miss the sight. It knocked the Crystal Palace fireworks silly."

"Since you are up, go and tell Commander Preston that he's wanted here," said Mackie.

It was not long before Peter arrived, looking and feeling better for his few hours' sleep. By this time the *Explorer* had reduced the distance between her and the hitherto unknown town to about ten miles.

"There's the *Vorwärts*," announced Mackie, handing his chum a pair of binoculars. "And we're in sight of some sort of show; looks like a big town to me."

Scanning the place, Preston tried to determine its origin. It had not an Eastern appearance. There were no domes and minarets, the typical features of Moslem cities, towns, and even villages. True, the houses were flat-roofed, many of them having a battlemented parapet. The town was presumably enclosed by a wall of about thirty feet in height, with a machicolated breast-work, since the side exposed to view was of this description. There was also a large gateway flanked by two massive square towers. Other towers of varying height reared themselves upon the otherwise uniform level of the buildings within the walls.

"What beats me," remarked Peter, after a lengthy

survey, "what beats me is the reason why those walls were built. Zaghamedi is a fortress in itself. Those battlements are not needed to keep out—well—outsiders."

"Including ourselves?" rejoined Hugh.

"Hardly. No, I mean Arabs and the savage tribes of the desert."

"Perhaps they have rows between themselves," suggested Barr. "There may be more than one nation on the plateau."

"We'll find out, I hope," rejoined Preston, as he signalled for quarter speed. "We won't trouble about von Müller for the present. We'll just fly round the place to see what's what."

The wind that had risen to half a gale since sunrise had now dropped to a flat calm. Smoke from various parts of the town rose almost vertically in the warm though by no means oppressive air. Barr had vindicated himself as a prophet. Here, almost in the centre of the tableland, was a wide belt of still air. To a certainty a terrific disturbance of the atmosphere still raged on all sides of the plateau, and would rage while the sun was above the horizon.

"We'll keep to a thousand feet altitude," decided Preston. "There's no knowing what surprise these people have up their sleeve. They may even have some sort of anti-aircraft protection."

Turning east, the *Explorer* followed the line of the south wall. So slow was his speed that the observation windows could be opened, admitting air that, even with

due allowance for altitude, was warm and yet bracing.

"See anyone?" asked Mackie.

"Not a soul," replied Peter.

"Nor can I," continued his chum. "The place looks deserted. Yet that smoke—— Ah! I've spotted a fellow! He's peering out of that tower. He looks scared stiff. He's gone now."

"What sort of man was he?" asked Tomayn.

"Dark skinned with long straight hair," replied Mackie.

"Then he's not of negroid descent," decided the scientist. "That's hopeful. Of course, bearing in mind the geographical position of Zaghamedi, he may be of Egyptian stock. I don't mean a modern Egyptian, but a race descended directly from the people over whom the Pharaohs ruled. On the other hand, those buildings do not show traces of Egyptian architecture."

"Then what sort of race do you think he belongs to?" asked Hugh.

"Possibly Jewish," replied Tomayn, still cherishing visions of himself as discoverer of the Lost Tribes. "Unfortunately I didn't see the man."

"But he was dark-skinned," protested Peter.

"Why not?" rejoined Tomayn. "The dwellers of Judaea two thousand years ago were very different in complexion from, say, their co-religionists in Northern Europe, although defined facial peculiarities persist. Mediæval painters in Italy, France, and elsewhere were in error, I take it, when, with fine conceit, they depicted

162 The Secret of the Plateau

their Biblical characters with features as fair as or fairer than their own. And there's another circumstance that supports my theory: those fellows who were hurled over the cliff when we first arrived."

"Ay!" exclaimed Peter, with a shudder. "Well?"

"Moloch," continued the scientist. "You may remember that when the Israelites were taken into captivity they practised idolatrous rites, amongst them 'passing through fire in honour of the heathen deity Moloch'. I'm anxious to prove my theory."

"Oh, how?" asked Mackie.

"By going amongst the inhabitants," replied Tomayn calmly.

His listeners gaped with astonishment. Did they hear aright? Was the hitherto querulous, sarcastic, sometimes timorous Tomayn so overcome by his zeal in the interests of science that he was willing to throw away his life? Or was it mere bravado? Or the effect of the exhilarating air?

"You wouldn't stand an earthly, sir," declared Barr bluntly.

"I'll risk that," rejoined the scientist. "A lot depends upon the element of novelty. If these natives have never before seen a white man——"

"How about those airmen who tried and who disappeared without a trace?" asked Preston.

"Perhaps they never even succeeded in gaining the plateau," suggested Tomayn.

"There's one!" interrupted Mackie excitedly. "No, two! They're on the tower at the angle of the wall."

Tomayn snatched up Peter's binoculars. Barr handed Preston his.

Brought within a visual distance of ten or fifteen feet, the two inhabitants of that mysterious city proved to be men of tall stature, of nut-brown complexion, and with almost black hair artificially coiled into ringlets that descended to their shoulders. One was bearded, the long dark hair being treated similarly to his tresses. The other was clean-shaven. Both had features resembling those of kings on ancient Greek coins. The bearded one wore a species of chain armour with a conical cap of burnished metal. By his side hung a short straight-bladed sword; in his right hand he grasped a sort of battle axe, a pole of about eight feet in length, terminating in a sickle-shaped blade.

The other man was apparently unarmed but carried something that looked like a scroll of stiff paper.

Both were intently watching the approaching ship. There was neither apprehension nor defiance shown on their impassive features. Occasionally their lips moved in conversation.

"I'd give something to hear and understand their language," murmured Tomayn.

Just as the *Explorer* was about to starboard helm in order to pass parallel to the eastern wall the man holding the scroll stooped. The next instant the object rose swiftly in the air, leaving a trail of smoke in its wake.

Fascinated, Preston and his companions watched the

approach of the unknown messenger. Then, pulling himself together, Peter closed the window of the observation cabin.

It was just in time. The missile burst, sending out showers of white-hot flame. Some of the seething combustible adhered to the plate-glass window, cracking it by reason of the intense heat. Other portions of flaming matter stuck to the metal envelope until the interior of the hull grew unpleasantly hot.

Had the *Explorer's* envelope been of anything but non-inflammable material the fate of the airship would have been sealed. As it was, the stuff merely burnt itself out, although fragments of the glowing substance, caught in the swiftly revolving blades of the propellers, provided a Catherine wheel display for quite thirty seconds.

"Greek fire!" commented Tomayn.

Quickly Preston took the airship up another thousand feet.

"What's the old blighter doing now, Hugh?" he inquired.

Mackie and Tomayn had gone to the port observation window to watch developments.

They saw the flame-throwing man stoop to pick up another missile. What was its range? Was the *Explorer*, at her increased distance, still within the limit of that gas-propelled incendiary bomb?

Even as the two men looked they saw the Zaghamedian stagger. For a brief instant he grasped the coping of the battlement with both hands. Blood

welled from a circular hole in the centre of his forehead.

Then his legs gave way and he dropped out of sight.

"By smoke!" ejaculated Tomayn furiously. "That's torn it! Someone's shot the man!"

"Who has?" demanded Preston sharply. "There hasn't been a rifle fired on board. Here, Barr, take over, please! I'll see——"

"It's not us!" interrupted Mackie excitedly. "That shot came from the *Vorwärts*. She's coming up astern."

Looking aft from the port observation window, Preston caught a glimpse of the German airship on the port quarter. She was steering a course at right angles to that of the *Explorer*, and was about to starboard helm in order to follow the course taken by her rival.

At that moment the bearded Zaghamedian, apparently undeterred by the fall of his comrade and with a sublime trust in the invulnerability of his armour, raised one of the rockets above the parapet.

Instantly came the unmistakable stutter of a machine-gun. The luckless warrior disappeared from view. A huge flame from the detonated missile, or missiles, rose high in the still air.

Tomayn shrugged his shoulders.

"It's taught them a lesson," he observed, with a surprising change of opinion. "That's the only way to deal with natives of that stamp. Force, brute force every time and all the time."

166 The Secret of the Plateau

"Steady, sir," protested Preston. "We can hardly blame them. They didn't know our intentions."

"It might have been the same if they had," retorted the scientist. "Now, if we, or von Müller's crowd, have put fear into—"

"Port helm!" shouted Preston. "Full ahead!"

For by some prearranged signal the battlements of the town grew black with warriors. From a hundred embrasures missiles, mostly of a combustible nature, hurtled through the air to the accompaniment of hoarse cries of defiance from the throng of armed men.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A Spoke in Von Müller's Wheel

Fortunately the *Explorer* was now beyond the extreme range of the shower of fiery missiles, while the *Vorwärts*, still using her machine-guns, had also placed a safe distance between herself and the uncompromising defenders of this mysterious town.

The warriors were quick to realize that their armour was no defence against the hail of bullets. They disappeared, crouching behind the battlements, although rockets continued to be discharged from the loopholes in the walls.

"Hornets' nest," remarked Peter tersely.

"And we can do nothing," added Barr. "Unless it's with half a dozen Verey pistols."

"Or we can submit the case to Geneva," remarked Tomayn sarcastically. "Apparently the League of Nations fights shy of civil war."

"Civil war?" echoed Barr.

"Certainly. Isn't Zaghamedi within the limits of the Sudan—of British territory? Those natives are technically citizens of the British Empire remember, although they haven't the foggiest notion that such an institution exists."

"They can be taught," said Mackie.

"Taught—how? By force of arms? Obsolete method, if we are to believe certain politicians. By propaganda? How on earth are you, or anyone else for that matter, to do that? It's doubtful whether anyone outside of Zaghamedi can speak the language, let alone write it. The inhabitants have clearly demonstrated that they will not hold any communication with strangers," declared the scientist. "So what are we to do?"

At that moment Dyson appeared.

"Wireless message from *Vorwärts*, sir," announced the operator. "Captain von Müller wishes to call attention to the fact that, although over territory claimed to be under British rule, he was compelled to open fire in self-defence."

Sitting at his desk Preston, after brief deliberation, wrote the following reply:

"To Captain von Müller, German airship *Vorwärts*. Your report acknowledged herewith. Suggest both airships withdraw to a distance of twenty kilometres from scene of operations and that we discuss the situation."

To which von Müller replied:

"Agreed; but before so doing propose taking aerial photographs of the city."

"There's no harm in that," observed Preston.

"Technically he's spying," protested Tomayn.

"There's a vast difference between technical and actual conditions here," rejoined Preston. "That's on your own admission, sir."

"Well, then, if von Müller takes photographs it's up to us to do the same or go one better," persisted the scientist.

"Quite: I agree there," concurred the Commander. "If you'll get your apparatus ready and let me know your view points, I'll see that the *Explorer* will be at the desired positions; but I will not descend lower than fifteen hundred feet."

For the best part of two hours the British and the German airships cruised in company over the mysterious city. They met with no resistance. Possibly the inhabitants had learnt their lesson and feared further reprisals from one, if not both, of these formidable floating menaces. Or else, in the knowledge that their own missiles were unable to attain the height at which the airships cruised above them, they purposely withheld any show of defence or defiance in the hope that their foes would be lured to descend within range.

Throughout the whole of the photographic operation not a human being was visible below. The streets and market places were deserted except for a few strange-looking cattle in the latter.

"Not a sign of a horse or a camel anywhere," remarked Barr. "Knowing the formidable nature of the cliffs I'm not surprised at that; but how in the name of goodness did they get cattle up ten thousand feet of sheer cliff?"

Having cruised above the four quarters of the town the two airships set off on a southerly course. While

this flight was in progress Preston had a wireless message sent to the company's head-quarters reporting all well and nothing more.

Perhaps he did this with the idea of letting Tomayn announce his astonishing discoveries on his return to civilization; but it was a great mistake.

What he should have done was to have sent a detailed account to his employers, who would then have transmitted the report to the British Foreign Office. Then his instructions would be given by the Foreign Secretary and the responsibility to a large extent would be transferred from Peter's shoulders to a Government department.

Shortly before four in the afternoon both airships came to earth at about sixteen miles south of the bitterly hostile town.

The *Vorwärts*, secured by means of several sandbags, lay about a quarter of a mile to the west'ard of the *Explorer*, the latter being moored with two grapnels and cables from the bows.

This operation was only just completed when Captain von Müller and another German officer walked across to the *Explorer*.

At first Preston was under the impression that his visitors wished to confirm the previous radio message concerning the use of machine-guns over British territory. But von Müller, confident of Preston's acceptance of his declaration, did not refer to it.

"Are you thinking of asking for a concession regarding the finding of oil?" inquired von Müller.

"Really I don't know," he replied. "Are we, Mr. Tomayn?"

For a brief instant Tomayn and the German exchanged glances—challenging, provocative.

"Of course!" declared Tomayn sharply.

"*Himmel!*" ejaculated von Müller. "It will a waste of time be."

"Oh! And how might you know that?" countered Tomayn, and he added a sentence in German, the meaning of which Preston was unable to follow.

"Ich halte es für meine Pflicht—" began von Müller, but the scientist held up his hand in protest.

"Please speak English in front of the Commander," he rapped out.

The German smiled pleasantly.

"Of course," he agreed. "It is my error! Nevertheless I right am. That oil is no good in a sense commercial."

"And how did you find that out?" asked Preston, not because he was curious but because he felt it advisable to take some interest in a topic introduced by his visitor.

Again von Müller smiled.

"We took examples—*nein*, samples, I mean. It has a too-far high flash-point. We, in Zhermany have far better oil springs. Commercially it no good. The day after to-morrow we depart to resume our dislocated air voyage to Cape Town."

"Then you are not greatly interested in the town? Where we were fired upon, you know," asked Tomayn.

"No," replied von Müller carelessly, "I am an explorer with commercial instincts. The place with its flame-throwing savages does not appeal to me. Perhaps that discovery may interest the learned professors of our great universities. They might, in the interests of science, obtain permission from your Government to visit this inhospitable plateau to see for themselves. And, pardon my inquisitive question, what propose you to do?"

"Oh, just carry on and have a look round," replied Tomayn, with equal indifference.

"Yes; we must complete a preliminary survey, Herr von Müller," added Peter.

After that conversation turned on general topics until the German's departure.

"What was von Müller driving at when he said that the oil was no good?" asked Preston.

Tomayn shrugged his shoulders.

"Eyewash!" he exclaimed. "In the first place, I don't know how he found time to obtain samples unless it was on the first night of his arrival here. These Germans are good bluffers but they are failures at subterfuges. They're too palpable. You can bet your last shilling on it that the oil is of high quality. Properly exploited, those oil-fields will be worth untold millions. Von Müller knows that, so he's clearing off—not to the Cape, but back to Germany, in order to obtain a concession from our benevolent Government."

"Then why doesn't the *Vorwärts* start to-night?"

"More bluff!" declared Tomayn. "That *would* arouse our suspicions. We have to stop his little game."

"How?" demanded Preston. "We can't leave yet. Our task isn't accomplished—not by long chalks."

"I'm not suggesting that we should accidentally disable the *Vorwärts*," replied the scientist. "But we can put a spoke in von Müller's wheel—to-night! All we have to do is to ascend and—"

He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Right! I'm game!" agreed Peter.

## CHAPTER XIX

# A Question of Longitude

"Tomayn hasn't got you to agree to any underhand business, has he, old son?" inquired Mackie, when the two chums were in the seclusion of the Commander's cabin.

It was an hour after midnight. The *Explorer* with, her engines shut off, floated almost motionless in the calm night air at a height of two thousand feet above the plateau of Zaghamedi.

"Do you think that possible?" asked Peter quietly.

"Sorry, old son!" exclaimed Mackie. "Rotten bad form on my part; but I'm curious."

"Then read that," continued Preston, handing his companion a sheet of paper on which were written a couple of hundred incomprehensible words. "Here's the Code Book. You might decode the report and then I can satisfy myself that I haven't made an error."

By the aid of the *Black Comet* Company's private code, Mackie unravelled the secret of the Commander's report.

It was a lengthy statement, dealing with the almost simultaneous arrival of the *Explorer* and the *Vorwärts* at Zaghamedi; of the deliberate firing of the oil lakes

by the unfriendly natives; of the discovery of the walled town and of the hostile reception accorded to the crews of the two airships. Then came the most important part of the report:

"It is believed that von Müller is returning to Germany to-morrow with the intention of obtaining an oil concession, although he declared that the oil is of poor quality and of no commercial value. Shall await your instructions until 5 a.m. If not received by that hour I will expect your reply between midnight and 5 a.m. on Thursday. Preston, Commander. Message ends."

"That's all straightforward and above board, Peter," declared Mackie.

"Thought so. I'll tell Dyson to put it through at once."

The *Explorer* remained aloft with four hundred feet of aerial trailing and with all her lights burning. She made no attempt to conceal her position from her German rival. No doubt von Müller was puzzling his brains when his operator reported that a lengthy code message was being sent out from the British airship. At any rate, although the *Vorwärts* could receive messages that she was unable to decipher, she was unable to send any out except over very short distances unless she too rose sufficiently high to be able to lower her aerial.

"I'm dashed if I know why she doesn't," observed Peter. "But in any case she's too late."

An hour passed, but, apart from the head-quarters'

acknowledgment, no reply came in answer to Peter's message. He realized that some considerable time must necessarily elapse owing to the decoding of the message and the fact that the responsible heads of the department were probably in bed.

"Another airship heading this way!" exclaimed Barr. "It must be the *Jeanne d'Arc*."

"She may be the *Vorwärts* under way," remarked Preston.

"No fear, sir," persisted Barr. "The German is still where we left her. It must be the Frenchman. She's making towards us. She must have spotted our lights some time ago."

Soon the oncoming airship was recognized as de Nonancourt's. She was flying slowly but steadily, only her foremost pair of propellers being in action. The determined Frenchman had fulfilled his promise to himself. Although there was only sufficient petrol on board to bring him to his immediate objective de Nonancourt had challenged fate.

"She's easing down," declared Mackie.

Very slowly the *Jeanne d'Arc* glided past the motionless British airship, altering course slightly when she perceived the latter's trailing aerial. Then she came gently to earth, bringing up almost on the site previously occupied by the *Explorer* and consequently about four hundred yards to the east'ard of the *Vorwärts*.

"De Nonancourt's done that on purpose," declared Tomayn.

"Of course," agreed Preston. "There's nothing to prevent him doing that, is there? It isn't a forced landing."

"On purpose to irritate von Müller," continued the scientist. "You wait! There'll be trouble."

In his mind Peter decided that that was out of the question. Even taking into consideration the pugnacious disposition of the Prussian airman and the quick-tempered nature of his Gallic rival, it was hardly possible that they should come to loggerheads in the face of a common danger and while they were technically on British territory.

"I'll turn in now, Barr," he remarked. "Directly Dyson receives a reply wake me."

At thirty-five minutes past five, or shortly before dawn, Barr entered the Commander's cabin with the long-expected message.

It was simply: "Sit tight. Expect communication between 1 and 2 a.m. to-morrow. Starlight."

"Hardly worth arousing you, sir," observed Barr apologetically. "But you gave me instructions to do so."

At that moment Mackie rushed into the cabin.

"Turn out, old man!" he exclaimed. "There's a regular bust up! The French and the Germans are going for one another like billy-o!"

In a trice Preston was out of his bunk and struggling into his clothes. Then he ran along the alley-way to the for'ard observation cabin.

Hugh had certainly exaggerated. The rivals had

not come to blows, but there was no saying when they might do so. About a dozen of the crew of the *Vorwärts* had left their airship and were arguing loudly with a similar number of Frenchmen who had gathered on the starboard side of the German airship. De Nonancourt and von Müller were confronting each other, the former brandishing his fists while the German faced him with folded arms, a posture that appeared to rouse the Frenchman to greater fury.

Then a blow was struck.

One of de Nonancourt's compatriots attempted to restrain his leader, and in his excitement the captain of the *Jeanne d'Arc* had struck his brother airman in the face.

At this the Germans jeered. In the bright moonlight the expressions and the gestures of the rival parties could be distinctly seen by the watchers on the *Explorer*. Then a stone was thrown.

"We've got to stop that!" declared Preston.

Mindful of Captain Starlight's warning before the *Explorer* left England, Peter realized that now was the time for action. The rivals must be separated, although the manner of their separation was a more ticklish task than that of parting two savage dogs.

"Engine-room, stand by!" he ordered. "Deflate even-numbered balloonets! Clear away fore and aft mooring tackle!"

"Are we descending, sir?" inquired the wireless operator who was still waiting the Commander's instructions to "acknowledge".

"We are!" replied Peter.

"But the aerial's out!"

"Then wind the blessed thing in," snapped Preston.

"What's left will have to stop or carry away."

Dyson, who had never before heard Preston "tick him off", or any of the crew for that matter, rushed off to wind in his precious aerial.

"Where are you making for?" inquired Hugh, noticing, contrary to routine, Peter himself was at the quartermaster's post.

"There!" replied his chum grimly. "There! Where those fellows are arguing the point. They'll be squashed flat if they don't shift; but between you and me, old son, I think they'll leg it."

Down swept the *Explorer*. Seizing the lanyard operating the siren Preston made the raucous-voiced instrument give throat.

"Out of control!" was the mendacious warning, and one that every airman, whatever his nationality, understands.

By this time Frenchmen and Germans were at grips. Providentially no shot had been fired and no ready knife had left its sheath. Nevertheless with fists and booted feet the rival crews were hard at it until a common danger, heralded by the peremptory warning of the siren, sent them scurrying for safety.

Instinctively the Germans ran towards their airship, the Frenchmen rushed in the opposite direction; so that when the *Explorer* bumped gently upon the grassy ground she had a clear landing-place all to

herself. Not only that, she had come down between the *Vorwärts* and the *Jeanne d'Arc*.

"What does all this mean?" demanded Commander Preston, feeling much like a policeman called to settle a dispute between a pair of semi-inebriated costermongers. "You can't start scrapping here, Herr von Müller, on British territory."

"Ach, I vos know dat," spluttered the German captain in broken English. He did that when he became excited, otherwise he had quite a good command of that language. "Ach, I vos know dat. But dat *schweinhund* de Nonancourt he come down—"

"Well, there's no objection to that, is there?"

"He come down an' tell me I vos a trespasser: dat dis vos French territory."

"Did he?" responded Preston. "Like his impudence! But he was only bluffing, you know."

"Bluffing, vot you mean?" inquired von Müller. "Ach, I know; puff out his cheeks—so. *Ja*, he was doing so."

"*Ciel!* 'E shall not mock me!" exclaimed an angry voice.

From under the bows of the *Explorer* appeared Count de Nonancourt; behind him in single file about a dozen of his men, some of whom bore traces of the encounter. A tall Frenchman immediately behind the *Capitaine* carried a pole with a small Tricolour. This he proceeded to plant within a few feet of the angry von Müller.

"This is going to be serious," thought Preston.

"Now, if von Müller spits on that flag—it looks as if he's going to do it—there'll be the father and mother of a row."

Something had to be done and that quickly.

Hurriedly Preston descended the ladder from the *Explorer's* entry-port, approached the Tricolour, and saluted it smartly. That, at any rate, had a soothing effect upon the Frenchmen.

"Capitaine de Nonancourt," he began, "I am sorry that a disagreement has occurred between two parties of a joint expedition. We are, all of us I hope, friendly rivals. No doubt this is a slight misunderstanding that can be amicably settled on neutral, that is to say, British territory."

"I do not take myself and my comrades from here, *Monsieur le Capitaine* Preston," declared de Nonancourt. "It is very good of you to offer mediation on English territory, but I remain here."

"Well, you are on British soil anyway," observed Preston cheerfully.

"*Non, non!*" exclaimed the Frenchman, throwing out his arms wildly. "You do no' understand. Here is French territory."

"Eh?" exclaimed Peter. "You are mistaken."

"*Moi?* I make no mistake, *Monsieur le Capitaine*. We have proof. To de west of ze longitude twenty-eight is French Sudan, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"It is," agreed Preston.

"You are at least ten kilometres to ze west or ze boundary, you an' zese Allemands 'ere."

"He vos wrong," interrupted von Müller.

"You haf taken ze observations, zir?" demanded de Nonancourt.

"Ja," replied the German airman. "Dis British territory."

"Haf you also taken ze observations?" continued the Frenchman addressing Preston.

"I have not," confessed Peter frankly.

A smile of triumph appeared on de Nonancourt's features. At length he went on to declare that the officers of the *Jeanne d'Arc* had made careful readings and were unanimous that all three airships were on the French side of the frontier where it crossed Zaghamedi from north to south. He had no objection to the *Explorer* alighting where she did; but in view of the insulting behaviour of the Germans he must require the *Vorwärts* to remove herself forthwith.

Von Müller began to dispute the Frenchman's claim when Tomayn, who had been listening to the dispute from the open entry-port, exclaimed:

"You've chosen a cheerless spot for an argument, gentlemen. Why not come on board and discuss the matter over a glass, and I have still some Bavarian lager, von Müller."

Even that bait failed to attract the disputants, so it was left to Preston to continue as peacemaker.

"I'm not doubting your belief in your claim, Count de Nonancourt. Apparently Herr von Müller is equally confident that his observations concerning the longitude of his position are correct. I haven't taken any such

observations since we came within sight of Zaghamedi. Now what do you say to a sporting offer?"

De Nonancourt shrugged his shoulders.

"Always it is like that with you Englishmen," he growled. "*Toujours le sport!*"

"This is a matter more serious than to be a sporting offer treated," muttered the German, harbouring an idea that the Englishman might suggest a boxing contest between him and de Nonancourt or, worse, a football match between the French and German crews.

"I suggest that both the *Jeanne d'Arc* and the *Vorwärts* remain where they are for the next twenty-four hours," continued Preston. "At noon we will take the time of the sun's maximum altitude, compare chronometers, and then decide our actual longitude."

To Peter's pleasant surprise the rivals agreed to the arrangement.

"But what do you propose to do with the *Explorer*, *Herr Kapitan* Preston?" asked von Müller.

"Do?" answered Peter. "Why, clear out until just before noon, just to show that I can trust de Nonancourt and you to keep faith with each other."

## CHAPTER XX

# Von Müller's Revenge

Quietly the representatives of the two rival airship crews returned to their respective craft; although it was noticed that the Frenchmen had left their Tricolour still floating over the debated territory.

"What's the idea of clearing out?" asked Mackie. "Until the matter in dispute is settled we've as much right as de Nonancourt has—probably more."

"I meant what I said," replied Preston. "Anything to keep the peace. Having given their promise neither de Nonancourt nor von Müller will break his word. Of that I feel sure. So we're going on a voyage of exploration to fill in the time. Also for another purpose."

"Eh?"

"It's like this," explained Peter. "The racket may break out again if there's any doubt about the result of the observations. We've been jolly lucky to be able to prevent those Frenchmen and Germans doing themselves further mischief; but we're still sitting on a keg of gunpowder, in a manner of speaking. So I'm wirelessing home for further instructions."

"We're out of radio range by daylight, old thing," remarked his chum.

"We are; but not out of touch with the Sudan Government Wireless Station at Khartum. So we'll send them a code message. I don't suppose they can decode it, but no matter. We'll get them to retransmit the message to Captain Starlight. *He'll* know what to do with it."

This step was accordingly taken. Then the *Explorer* cruised far to the east'ard of the mysterious town, Tomayn taking numerous aerial photographs *en route*.

At eleven o'clock local time the *Explorer* returned and alighted. During the latter operation she inadvertently overran her distance and finally moored a good five hundred yards ahead of her former position and slightly to the east'ard. Consequently imaginary lines joining the positions occupied by the three airships would form a triangle with a base line of four hundred yards between the two foreigners and a distance of about 550 yards separating the *Jeanne d'Arc* from the *Explorer*.

A few minutes before noon six white-uniformed sun-helmeted officers, two of each nationality concerned, grouped themselves in the open, and, armed with sextants, began to bring the lower limb of the sun down to the horizon. On a trestle table close by were three chronometers over which a wordy battle had been fought between the German and French representatives over an error of two seconds, until at Preston's suggestion a mean of the three times was accepted as being the correct one.

The actual time of the sun crossing the meridian

was then agreed upon, and the officers proceeded to consult nautical almanacs to decide the longitude.

It was a tedious business. The Frenchmen and Germans wrangled. Neither would give way.

"Look here, gentlemen!" exclaimed Preston, after patiently awaiting the results of their observations. (Mackie and he had completed theirs a quarter of an hour ago). "Look here: I'm pretty certain we're exactly on the twenty-eighth degree of longitude, dead on the neutral line of the British and French frontier. After all's said and done, a few seconds or even minutes don't matter so very much. Suppose, in order to settle the argument, that the *Explorer* is on the neutral line: then the *Jeanne d'Arc* is on British territory and the *Vorwärts* is on French. You, Count de Nonancourt, are therefore enjoying the privilege of being on British ground, while von Müller has temporarily accepted the hospitality of the French Government by mooring on the French side of the frontier. Don't you think that is a mutually satisfactory arrangement? If I might say more I would remind you, Kapitan von Müller, that you can easily change your position if you wish. Count de Nonancourt might have great difficulty to move his airship over the frontier."

"Ach! What do you say, Herr Kapitan?" asked the German. "Great difficulty? How? Why?"

"I happen to know that the *Jeanne d'Arc* is almost out of fuel," explained Peter. "You probably noticed that only two propellers were in action when she arrived.

She certainly has not enough petrol to take her to the nearest depot."

For a few moments the German remained silent, letting the facts sink into his mind.

Then he laughed uproariously.

"Ah, ah! Goot!" he exclaimed. "Ver' good indeed!"

"That's done it," thought Preston. "That's what generally happens when a fellow tries to act as a peacemaker! A referee's task at a popular footer match is bad enough, but this is a hundred times worse."

But to Peter's astonishment von Müller walked across to the two Frenchmen, clicked his heels and saluted in true Prussian fashion.

He spoke in halting French, but Peter, standing a few feet away, was unable to understand him.

The Count de Nonancourt understood. He too saluted and replied in French, speaking so rapidly that von Müller had to request him to talk slower.

Then the French and German representatives saluted their British rivals and returned to their airships.

"What was all that chin-wagging about?" asked Peter.

"I couldn't make head nor tail of it any more than you could," confessed Hugh. "It sounded to me as if von Müller had challenged the two Frenchmen to a duel, or something like that."

"I knew there'd be a mess up," declared his chum inelegantly. "Look here, Hugh. We'll have to stop this bother somehow."



"We've wirelessed for instructions, so I don't see that we can do more," said Mackie. "Until midnight we can't expect Captain Starlight's reply."

"Until one o'clock," corrected his chum. "Or eleven o'clock British standard time. So until midnight we'll remain where we are and hope that there won't be a rumpus between those fellows."

Shortly after two in the afternoon the look-out on the *Explorer* reported that the *Vorwärts* was showing signs of getting under way.

Making their way to the after observation window the officers of the British airship saw that the Germans were in a state of activity. Fully two-thirds of the crew were ashore, engaged in emptying the sandbags by which the *Vorwärts* was tethered to the ground.

"Well, our troubles in that direction are ended if von Müller clears off," remarked Mackie. "Probably, as Tomayn said, he's legging it back to the Fatherland to get his Government to obtain an oil concession."

Presently the *Vorwärts* became air-borne. She was held merely by the hands tailing-on the drag ropes. This puzzled the British onlookers, since the German airship would rise long before the ground party could return on board. The usual procedure was to take on board sufficient ballast before emptying the sandbags, and then, when the crew were at their stations, the inside ballast would be dropped overboard.

Then a German Republican Mercantile ensign was displayed from the *Vorwärts*. To the astonishment of Preston and his companions the ground party

began to move for'ard, dragging the airship with them.

In the still air this was a simple manœuvre, but the spectators' astonishment grew more and more as the *Vorwärts* was moved in the direction of the stationary *Jeanne d'Arc*!

As the distance between the French and German airships decreased, a number of Frenchmen left their craft and formed up on the ground facing outwards at attention.

"What does it mean?" asked Peter.

Mackie could only shake his head. The whole business was so far a mystery.

At a mere thirty yards from the *Jeanne d'Arc* the men hauling the *Vorwärts* halted. Then in obedience to a signal they swung the latter's stern round until she came to rest side by side with her rival. There was less than six feet between the two bulging envelopes.

Then the Frenchmen broke into activity. A large hose was lowered from the *Jeanne d'Arc* and the end taken on board the German airship.

A few minutes later the two captains, who previously had been at loggerheads, came strolling side by side towards the *Explorer*. They were smiling, laughing, and talking volubly.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Peter, "I thought de Nonancourt was going to kiss him then. What's the idea? Let's go and meet them."

By the time Preston and Mackie had gone as far as the entry-port von Müller and his companion were about half-way to the *Explorer*. They were standing

still and exchanging their cases. De Nonancourt took a large cigar and lighted it, while von Müller accepted one of the Frenchman's cigarettes.

"We know it matters not that we smoke, Herr Kapitan Preston," was von Müller's greeting. "To your scheep there no danger is. Mit *die essenz*—pardon! it is petrol of which I speak—one has to precautions take."

"That is so," agreed Peter.

"And ze worthy Count von Müller, learning of you of our deficiency in *essence*, has provided us with sufficient to take the air to Algiers," explained de Nonancourt. "You English talk of ze chivalry of ze air! *Parbleu!* Ze chivalry of ze air it knows no frontiers."

"I vos do leedle," protested the German.

"A leetle zat means ver' much to me!" rejoined de Nonancourt, bowing, hand over his heart.

"It's jolly sporting of you any way," remarked Preston.

"*Toujours le sport,*" said de Nonancourt to himself. "With the English it is always sport. Can they never be serious?"

Noticing the French airman's perplexed look Peter hastened to correct a wrong impression.

"It's perfectly topping, monsieur!" he added, which left de Nonancourt more puzzled than ever.

## CHAPTER XXI

### The Brotherhood of the Air

"Breeze springing up from the nor'west, sir," announced the *Explorer's* quartermaster.

De Nonancourt and von Müller had accepted Preston's invitation to have refreshments on board before returning to their respective airships. They, with Mackie and their host, were seated in the latter's cabin when the intimation was brought them.

In ordinary circumstances the fact that the flat calm had given way before a north-westerly wind would not have perturbed the airmen in the least, but this was no ordinary circumstance.

The fact that the *Jeanne d'Arc*, insecurely moored, was lying alongside and almost touching the German airship, made instant action necessary.

All three airships were lying out in the open—a gently undulating expanse of grassy ground with a few patches of light, sandy soil and small outcrops of rock. On the northern and western edges of this open ground were trees of a coniferous type. Such was the altitude of the plateau that its vegetation resembled that of the Scottish lowlands, although Zaghamedi was less than twenty degrees north of the Equator.

The *Explorer* was nearest the pinewoods. She

would be under their lee unless the wind veered or backed considerably; also she was moored by the bows and would swing head-on to the wind, whatever its direction.

The *Vorwärts* and the *Jeanne d'Arc* were not so happily situated. Both were exposed to the wind. The German airship was now moored fore and aft with grapnels well buried in the ground, but the French one was merely held down by sandbags, since, having refueled with German petrol, she was about to ascend again.

A breeze was not only springing up; it *had* sprung up. It was increasing.

Already grey clouds were moving rapidly overhead. For the first time since the *Explorer* had crossed the English Channel, clouds, other than those of wind-driven sand, obscured the sun. The barometer, very low before (at that altitude it was normally between 17 and 18 inches) had not given any previous warning; and, again a remarkable feature, the temperature had increased.

"It'll be short and sharp," declared Preston. "Look here, Hugh, we'll be safe enough here. I'll remain with the duty watch. Will you turn out the watch below and give de Nonancourt a hand?"

Mackie hurried off to call for volunteers. Meanwhile the French and German captains were doing a breathless sprint across the intervening ground with the common object of saving the two airships from destruction.

There could be little doubt as to what would happen if the *Jeanne d'Arc* were swept from her temporary berth. She would be carried with terrific force against the *Vorwärts* and both craft would be involved in complete disaster.

Fortunately the operation of supplying petrol to the French airship had been completed ten minutes or so before, and the hose had been taken on board the *Vorwärts*. Directly the breeze was noticed several of the French crew, assisted by some of the men from the *Vorwärts*, held on to the bow rope to check the *Jeanne d'Arc's* tendency to raise herself for'ard.

Before de Nonancourt had boarded his craft Mackie and his volunteers were racing across the ground. They too held on to the trailing ropes, and for the present the airship was fully under control, but with a tendency to drive broadside on to her very near neighbour.

Under these conditions it was out of the question to start the propellers; equally so to attempt to rise vertically. The only possible course open to him was to drag her bodily to wind'ard until she established ample manœuvring space.

"All hands!" shouted Mackie. "Tail on there!"

It was a fight against time. Momentarily the wind was increasing in velocity. Fortunately, owing to the height of the plateau above sea-level, the air was not subject to the sudden tornadoes of true tropical regions except at the extreme edges of the huge tableland. The central part was generally unaffected by vicious air-currents, and gales, when they did occur, which was

at rare intervals, began in a discreet manner, even though they gave the aneroid little chance to announce their imminent arrival.

The French crew were now at their posts while German volunteers manned the holding-down ropes and the hawser by which the *Jeanne d'Arc* was held astern.

In obedience to their officer's order the hands from the *Explorer* manned the French airship's bow rope. Then, actuated by a common impulse, the British and German airmen began "walking back" with the cumbersome gasbag.

Every ounce of strength was wanted; every pound of deadweight. Gradually the *Jeanne d'Arc* drew apart from her rival. Then a gust of slightly higher velocity would send her sideways almost to her former position, while the hauling party were dragged willy-nilly over the ground. Had one man relinquished his grasp the scale would have turned in favour of the elements, but one and all held grimly to the tautened rope, some of them being lifted ten feet in the air in the process, and the human element tipped the beam.

Gaining twenty feet, losing ten; the strenuous tug-of-war went on. Even the horniest palms began to blister with the constant friction of the ropes, while men less accustomed to "heaving away" had their hands chafed until blood came from the raw wounds. Yet the grim fight went on.

"Dig your heels in, men!" shouted Mackie time after time, as the unwieldy gasbag showed signs of

regaining the ground *she* had lost. "Now, walk away with her!" he would add, as the temporary lull in the wind following each gust gave the rescue party their chance to steal a march upon the enemy.

At length a reasonable margin of safety was attained. At a hundred yards from the *Vorwärts* the nose of the *Jeanne d'Arc* was swung head to wind. Her propellers began to roar.

"*Lâchez prise!*!" shouted the French captain.

"Let go!" ordered Mackie, and a similar command was given to the German ground party.

Up leapt the *Jeanne d'Arc* to the comparative safety of the upper air.

Anxiously Mackie gave a glance to assure himself that his men had obeyed smartly. As he did so a gasp of horror broke from the crowd of British and German helpers.

One of the latter had accidentally become entangled in one of the airship's holding-down ropes. He was now dangling twenty feet below the *Jeanne d'Arc* at a height of some four hundred feet, held by a hitch that might slip at any moment.

The luckless German did not lose his head even though he was in imminent danger of having it battered against the ground. Had he wriggled or struggled the rope would have slipped and sent him headlong.

Grasping the tautened line with his left hand, the German proceeded to transfer the slipping hitch into a knot. Then he commenced to climb hand-over-hand towards the after nacelle.

It was a task beyond his strength. Already he was fatigued by his part in the hauling operations; the sudden upward jerk had temporarily exhausted most of the air in his lungs. Gently he lowered himself until once more he dangled at the end of the rope.

Meanwhile the *Jeanne d'Arc* was rising; but the revolutions of her propellers had been considerably reduced. Apparently de Nonancourt, once he had parted company with the ground, meant to keep more or less over the same spot until the atmospheric conditions permitted the airship to descend again.

Ten minutes passed. Although the onlookers, or rather up-lookers, shouted and waved to the Frenchman their warnings were unheeded. None of the *Jeanne d'Arc*'s crew was aware that she carried additional live ballast in the form of an unfortunate German dangling twenty feet beneath her.

"I expect the Frenchies are thinking we're just cheering them," declared one of the *Explorer*'s crew. "As if—hello! That looks promising."

From the after nacelle a slight lithe figure appeared, hung by his hands for a brief instant, and then dropped slowly at the end of a bowline.

When level with the unfortunate German, who now seemed to have lost consciousness since he dangled inertly at the end of his rope, his rescuer stopped. A gap of at least ten feet separated the two, a gap that it was beyond the power of the crew to decrease.

Undeterred the rescuer began to sway himself at the end of his rope. The oscillations increased until

the spectators held their breath. The man's contortions were so violent and the rope looked so frail that they expected the latter to part like pack-thread and send the gallant Frenchman hurtling through space.

The rescuer swung within reach of the German, obtained a grip. Both swayed and then swung back until they were immediately beneath the nacelle.

A second rope was then lowered. With his free hand the French airman secured this round the other's body. Then he cut the drag-rope adrift.

In less than thirty seconds the German was hauled up into safety, while the rescuer, waving in acknowledgment of the plaudits of the crowd far below, ascended in a leisurely manner and disappeared from sight.

"Did you see the rescue, old son?" inquired Mackie, when he returned to the *Explorer*.

"Did I not!" replied Preston. "One act like that does more for international peace than a hundred hours' session at Geneva!"

## CHAPTER XXII

### The Night Attack

"Where's Mr. Tomayn, James?" asked Preston.

"In the dark room developing plates, sir," replied Barr. "Do you want to see him?"

"I did, but it can wait," rejoined the Commander. "Remember to see that the required extra hands fall in for the First Watch. We're ascending just before midnight."

It was seven-thirty. The storm had been but short-lived. Hardly a breath of wind stirred the branches of the near-by trees. It was pitch dark, for the moon was not due to rise until shortly after eight.

In the seclusion of his cabin Peter wondered whether he had done the right thing in reporting by wireless the dispute between the French and German airmen. In view of subsequent amicable relations between the two crews, culminating in the rescue of the German entangled in the *Jeanne d'Arc*'s ground rope, his action seemed precipitate. On reflection it seemed akin to "sneaking".

Preston was still debating in his mind when a hideous yell, the concerted output of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of savage throats, rent the still air. Simul-

taneously blows were rained upon the airship's envelope.

Taking advantage of the intense darkness, the Zaghamedians had made a surprise attack upon the invaders of their hitherto inviolate land. Even now they might be pouring inflammable oil over the vessel with the intention of setting her on fire!

Snatching up his automatic, one of the very few the *Explorer* had on board, Preston rushed to the control room, where Mackie, Barr, and two of the crew were on duty.

"What have you done?" demanded the Commander.

"Ordered all balloonets to be charged," replied Mackie. "The engineers are standing by."

"Good! We'll have to slip the bow cables. It strikes me these natives are getting busy with that already. Nip below, Andrews, and cut both cables."

While the man was below in the cable flat Preston shouted to Barr to run aft and take charge of the crew stationed there. Then, opening one of the observation windows, he attempted to use his automatic to drive the attackers from the mooring ropes.

In that he made a decided error. The cabin was lighted. Outside all was in darkness. The hostile natives had fortunately not resorted to incendiary methods, but they promptly hurled half a dozen spears.

One grazed Preston's shoulder, several whizzed perilously close to his head and blunted their points against the transverse bulkhead.

Mackie, in default of a better weapon, had taken

200      The Secret of the Plateau

and loaded one of the Verey pistols. This he promptly fired, raising his hand above the sill and depressing the muzzle.

Instantly a vivid red glare lighted up the scene. Apparently the rocket had found a billet before exploding, for a yell of mortal pain outvoiced the shouts of the attackers.

"There are thousands of 'em!" exclaimed Hugh, as he ejected the empty cartridge.

While the light lasted it seemed as if Mackie had not exaggerated. A dense crowd of armoured warriors surged round the airship. Hundreds more were still streaming from the pine woods towards their objective. Probably by this time swarms were hanging on to the propellers and smashing them to matchwood with blows of their peculiarly shaped battle-axes.

Anxiously Peter glanced at the indicators showing the quantity of Crophelium gas admitted to the balloonets. A blue light glowed on the instrument board, the signal that the engineers were ready to set the propellers in motion.

"All clear below there yet?" shouted Preston, raising his voice above the terrific din without.

"Nearly through, sir," replied Andrews, sweating as he hacked away at the tough cable.

Then came an appalling crash amidships, followed by redoubled shouts that did not come from without.

The enemy had succeeded in battering a hole in one side of the envelope, and were pouring in with the intention of overwhelming the crew.

One man attempted to bar their progress, felling a couple of warriors with the first weapon that came to hand, a ladle from the galley. Then he went down before a vicious blow from a battle-axe and the armoured fighting men pressed onward over his prostrate body.

In a surging mass, reinforced by others from the countless swarm without, the attackers poured along the alley-way towards the for'ard control cabin. In the confusion a spearhead smashed one of the electric lamps, plunging the narrow corridor into darkness.

"Hold them for another half-minute if you can," shouted Peter.

Mackie and one of the crew, each armed with Verey pistols, fired at point-blank range into the press. In the confined space the effect was terrific. Green and red flashes threw the attackers into confusion. Blinded by the sudden glare, burnt by the white-hot chemicals emitted from the fiercely sizzling rockets, they attempted to flee. Those in front were unable to go back by reason of the press behind. Retreat was difficult, for men bunched together could not squeeze through the gaping rent in the airship's side through which they had recently made their way in single file.

All this time other warriors were battering against the airship's side. Some, in an excess of zeal, had mounted on their comrades' shoulders, forming a living ladder in order to reach the top of the envelope.

Then, with fanatical bravery, the men in the alley-way rallied. A flaming torch had been handed in to

them. Two men bearing shields appeared, forced their way to the forefront, and shouted encouragement to their previously discomfited fellows.

Again Mackie fired. The Verey light exploded harmlessly against one of the shields. The attackers pressed on. They were now within fifteen feet of the observation-room door.

Then the man with Hugh fired. Gaining by experience he aimed low, beneath the bottom edge of one of the shields.

The Zaghamedian warriors' armour almost without exception ended in thigh-pieces to the knees. Below that their limbs were exposed except for shoes of undressed hide.

One of the shield bearers dropped, yelling in agony. The other, leaping wildly in excruciating pain, threw the men behind him into confusion. The flaming torch fell on the deck and added to the panic.

Then the *Explorer* began to rise. In spite of the fact that more gas had been pumped into the balloonets there was not sufficient to impart buoyancy. She lifted sluggishly.

She began to list to starboard.

Anxiously Preston glanced at the clinometer. It registered a heel of thirty degrees. Was it that the attackers had succeeded in breaking open several of the balloonets on the starboard side? If so, the *Explorer* was done for, and all that remained to do was to fight to the end. Better by far that, than to fall into the hands of the Zaghamedians who forced their captives

over the edge of the plateau by means of flaming oil.

Above the din came a weird succession of sounds. In a vague sense Peter compared the noise to that of a number of crabs struggling in a basket, their shells rasping as they writhed over one another.

The airship began to recover her list. Then Preston understood. The rasping sounds were caused by the mail-clad warriors on the top of the envelope sliding and crashing to the ground when the sloping surface no longer afforded a hold.

Slowly the airship ascended, increasing her vertical speed as armoured warriors clinging to the propeller brackets were compelled to relax their grip. Yells of baffled rage followed her. Showers of spears were hurled, only to fall short and in many cases to drop with disastrous results upon the comrades of the men who had thrown them.

Then the scene below was bathed in a dazzling silvery light. Either the *Vorwärts* or the *Jeanne d'Arc* had unmasked a searchlight.

"We're up!" announced Peter, as Hugh, smoke-begrimed and breathless, entered the navigation cabin. "Who's switched on? Has the *Vorwärts* ascended?"

Before the dog-tired Mackie could go to the observation window an answer to Peter's second question was forthcoming. The insistent rattle of a machine-gun rent the air. The flashes, showing low down, indicated that it was the German airship that had opened fire and that she was still moored. The searchlight, then, came from the *Jeanne d'Arc*, who was still

cruising overhead and apparently waiting for the moon to be well above the horizon before attempting to descend.

Another machine-gun from the *Vorwarts* added to the din.

"She's better able to defend herself than we are," remarked Mackie. "No, by Jove! she's letting rip at the crowd that tried to rush us. They evidently haven't been attacked."

"Can you carry on here for a few minutes?" asked his chum. "I want to see what damage has been done. Thanks! I'll be as quick as I can. Keep her at a thousand feet. Follow the *Jeanne d'Arc* and then you won't mask her searchlight. Ah! She's machine-gunning too."

"Props running smoothly?"

"They're revolving," replied Peter grimly. "That's all I know about them for the present. Right-o, I won't be long."

"Mind where you tread," cautioned Hugh, as Preston crossed the threshold of the alley-way.

The passage was still in darkness; but by the aid of an electric torch the young Commander was able to pick his way.

A rush of cold air met him. Even though the airship was proceeding dead slow, the jagged gap in the side of the envelope admitted a fierce current of air. Obviously temporary repairs would have to be effected before the *Explorer* could hope to attain even half speed.

The alley-way reeked of burnt chemicals and other more noxious odours in spite of the blast of fresh air. Three corpses, clad in quaint armour, lay there, together with a number of weapons which the Zaghamedian warriors had discarded in their flight.

Gingerly Peter stepped over the relics of the fray. He peeped into his cabin. That was intact; so were the two adjoining ones. Then he came to the breach in the airship's side, full six feet in height and about three in width at its widest part. A bent sheet of metal flapped in the breeze, beating a dolorous tattoo upon the outer skin.

In the men's quarters just for'ard of the motor-room Preston found the bulk of the crew assembled. Some had been hurriedly bandaged; two were lying on mattresses placed on the floor; while Barr was tending the man who had so pluckily attempted to stem the initial inrush.

"Is he badly hurt?" asked the Commander.

"'Fraid so, sir," replied Barr.

"And the others?"

"Five slightly injured, sir, and—"

The pause struck Preston as significant.

"And what?"

"Two missing, sir!"

"Who?"

"Mr. Tomayn, sir, and—and Tommy Smith!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### Tomayn the Man

Barr's announcement figuratively dealt Peter a stunning blow between the eyes. He could hardly realize the fearful significance of the fact.

Tomayn, the charterer of the airship, a passenger for whom Preston, as commander of the *Explorer*, was responsible, had disappeared. Incidentally, the fine record of the *Black Comet* Line that no passenger had met with a fatal accident since its inauguration, was broken. Tomayn was missing. He might be dead already, though there was a strong possibility that he was a prisoner in the hands of the ferocious Zaghamedians, and that was a far worse fate than being killed outright.

And Tommy Smith! Too late Peter regretted that he had not left the lad behind at Khartum.

"Sure they are missing," he asked, a faint ray of hope flashing across his tortured mind.

"Certain, sir," replied one of the crew, whose bandaged hand and arm bore testimony to the part he had played in the defence. "It was when the blacks first broke into the alleyway. Some went for'ard, others aft. Smith was in the galley. He rushed out and they

nabbed him. Then Mr. Tomayn came out of the dark room. He may have been dazed, coming straight into the light, but he saw Tommy struggling and yelling. So he hurled a glass plate straight into the mob and dived in to get Tommy away. After that things got a bit mixed, especially when someone at the for'ard end of the alley-way started firing Verey lights into the crush. It was a rough house while it lasted, sir, and when we did push the blighters back and out of it, there were no signs of Mr. Tomayn and the kid."

Preston listened but paid scant heed to the narrative. He was trying to find some plan whereby the missing pair might be rescued. So far he knew of none. Practically unarmed, the crew of the *Explorer* could not go in pursuit even if the airship descended to earth again. By this time the two captives were probably carried a long way away, since the Zaghamedians were in full flight. Galled by a traversing fire from the *Vorwärts'* machine-guns, harassed by the hissing storm of bullets directed upon them from the *Jeanne d'Arc*, confused by the blinding glare of the searchlights, the attackers were in full flight.

Yet it was not exactly a disorderly flight. The mailed warriors possessed fanatical courage and a strong sense of discipline. They knew that they were beaten by the superior methods of the hitherto unknown invaders of their territory. Behind the walls of their city they could find shelter and a defence against their foes.

As they fled, several of them stopped to carry off

their dead and wounded, and even after the firing had ceased parties of them could be observed making for cover impeded though they were by their disabled comrades.

Two hours passed and the German airship made no attempt to ascend. Her searchlights, as were those of the *Explorer* and *Jeanne d'Arc*, played continuously across the scene of the conflict.

During the whole of this time Peter and Hugh, binoculars glued to their eyes, searched the ground in the faint hope that they might at least find the bodies of Tomayn and young Smith among the dead.

But the scientist was not dead, though he lay at death's door. In his gallant though futile attempt to prevent Tommy Smith from being carried off by the attackers he was felled by a blow with the haft of a spear.

Dazed by the blow, he was seized and carried down the alley-way. His captors passed him through the gap in the airship's side and dropped him into the arms of some of the warriors without. Already Tommy, still struggling and yelling, was being carried away. Again Tomayn attempted to fight his way to the lad, but in vain. Four men, holding the scientist by his arms and legs, frog-marched him, face downwards, away from the airship and in the direction of the pine wood. Forcing their way between throngs of armed men pressing to the attack, Tomayn's captors followed those who were taking Tommy Smith to his doom.

The din was indescribable. Face downwards and in the darkness of the night, Tomayn could see little or nothing except when Verey lights fired from the observation room of the *Explorer* lighted up the scene. He could hear the shouts of the attackers, the clank of mail as his captors bore him away, and the frantic cries of the terrified youth. All the while Tomayn, though partly dazed by the blow he had received, managed to keep his head clear of the ground.

Suddenly the *rat-tat-tat* of a machine-gun sounded above the turmoil. To the frog-marched captive it was like sweet music. Then the searchlight played upon the scene.

With one accord the warriors carrying Tomayn halted and turned to see what was causing those shrieks of mortal agony from the attackers. As they did so a traversing flight of machine-gun bullets swept their way. Three of them dropped, either dead or wounded; while the fourth, astonished beyond measure, stared dumbfoundedly at his stricken comrades.

For about ten seconds Tomayn lay where he had been so unceremoniously dropped, his remaining captor still gripping his left wrist.

The hiss of the bullets faded from his locality. The machine-gun was searching other parts of the ground, yet at any moment the German working the weapon might swing it back again.

It was a risk, that of being shot by a friendly bullet, but any risk was better than being hauled into captivity, tortured, and slowly done to death.

Drawing up his knees, Tomayn sprang to his feet. His captor, without relinquishing his grip, shortened his spear to plunge the blade into his prisoner's body.

By this time Tomayn was active in mind and body. His free right hand, fist doubled tightly, shot forward and caught the Zaghamedian fairly on the point of the jaw. The man reeled. His spear fell from his nerveless grasp. The next instant the white man retrieved the weapon.

Tomayn stood up, looking at the dripping blade. The searchlight played from behind, so that he could clearly see what was in front of him. He was standing in a shallow depression in the ground, surrounded by the bodies of his former captors together with several warriors who happened to be passing when the death-dealing swathe of bullets came that way.

That hollow had saved him. Provided he remained where he was, hiding beneath the corpses, he was comparatively safe. No bullets from the German airship could find him out, and when the surviving Zaghamedians had all taken to flight he could "lie doggo" until he could make his way back to the *Explorer*.

But in the hour of peril Tomayn was of sterner stuff.

He looked over the rim of the depression. Twenty yards away he caught sight of Tommy slung like a sack across the shoulders of a mailed warrior. The lad had either fainted or had been hit, for he neither moved nor uttered a sound.

Two other Zaghamedians were standing by and were debating with the first. Others more to the right and left were running for safety.

Gripping his spear tightly, Tomayn vaulted the ridge of intervening ground and dashed towards the knot of warriors.

Once he halted as the searchlight beam swung to the left, leaving him in utter darkness. Then, as the friendly rays again swept past him, he resumed his reckless advance.

Tomayn knew that he was taking chances. At the same time he did not mean to throw away any. To strike a blow at the armour-clad man might be a fatal blunder.

With a sweep of the broad-bladed spear the white man smote the still unsuspecting warrior below the knees, one of the few vulnerable parts that offered.

Down dropped Tommy's captor like a felled ox. The lad, who was not unconscious after all, wriggled clear of the writhing man.

"Keep quiet!" shouted Tomayn warningly, as he swung round to tackle the two who remained.

The element of surprise was no longer in his favour. He was merely a sorely tried man, defenceless except for the spear he held in his hand, and opposed to a couple of huge brawny warriors, almost completely defended by chain armour. One brandished a straight two-edged sword and bore a rectangular-shaped shield on his left arm; the other had one of those long-handled sickle-bladed battle-axes with which so many Zaghamedians were armed.

Shortening his spear Tomayn lunged at the man with the battle-axe. So swift was the thrust that the warrior was taken at a disadvantage. The point caught him in the chest even as his arms were raised to bring his weapon down upon the white man's unguarded head.

The Zaghamedian staggered.

Tomayn wrenched but could not withdraw the spear. Too late he realized that the blade was of a soft metal alloy. It had bent itself and was firmly held by the links of his antagonist's mail.

Down swept the axe, the despairing blow of a mortally wounded man. In the nick of time Tomayn relinquished his hold and leapt aside, then, wrenching the battle-axe from his adversary, he faced the third warrior.

Tomayn was now at a disadvantage. By changing position he was now facing the searchlight that still remained more or less fixed, although others were sweeping the ground both from the *Jeanne d'Arc* overhead and from the anchored *Vorwärts*.

Although he did not know it, one of the German searchlights was playing on the side of the *Explorer* where the struggle was still in progress. It was this beam that was almost blinding Tommy Smith's rescuer.

Crouching behind his shield, the Zaghamedian advanced. He was no coward, but the fall of his comrades had taught him caution.

Tomayn did not wait for the attack. He skipped aside, easily avoiding the ponderous movement of the

heavily mailed warrior, and again manœuvred until his back was turned to the dazzling beam of the search-light.

He swung his captured battle-axe. Metal clanged and sparks flew as the keen blade rasped against his antagonist's buckler. Like a flash the latter's sword blade sank deeply into Tomayn's left forearm.

Had the Zaghamedian been content to leave the blade in, the contest would have ended almost then and there: Tomayn would have been as helpless as a speared eel. But, thirsting to deliver a mortal blow, the warrior withdrew the blade.

The pain was excruciating. Tomayn felt as if his arm had been skewered with a red-hot iron. His left hand relinquished its grip of the haft of the battle-axe. The weapon was too heavy and cumbersome to be wielded with one hand only.

With a desperate effort the white man hurled the axe at his antagonist. As the latter turned it aside with his shield Tomayn sprung in. It was such a panther-like leap that before the warrior could shorten his sword the wounded Englishman had closed and was raining more or less ineffectual blows upon the other's metal-guarded face.

Then, locked in a close embrace, both crashed to the ground, the Zaghamedian uppermost.

For the present it was a deadlock. The Zaghamedian could not use his sword nor could he get to the daggers stuck in his belt. His buckler was now more of a hindrance than a protection. On the other hand Tomayn,

with one arm disabled, was pinned beneath the bulky form of his armour-clad foe. Momentarily he was growing weaker from loss of blood.

Meanwhile the rattle of machine-guns was incessant, although to the wounded desperate man the sound appeared to be growing fainter and fainter.

Suddenly the Zaghamedian gave a shrill scream, writhed and slid across Tomayn's body to the ground.

"A machine bullet's copped him right enough," thought Tomayn dully.

But he was mistaken.

Crouching over the dead warrior was Tommy Smith, holding one of the daggers in his hand. The plucky lad, disobeying Tomayn's orders to lie still, had seen his rescuer's desperate plight and had taken measures to silence the latter's assailant.

"You are wounded——" began the youth.

"Lie down!" hissed Tomayn fiercely. "Get under that shield and stop there."

It was a tone that brooked no opposition. Tommy obeyed. Then his rescuer, using his last remaining energies, rolled close to the corpse of his latest antagonist. Then he became unconscious.

For the best part of an hour Tommy lay in fear and trembling. He, too, knew that they were still in a very tight corner.

Parties of discomfited warriors were returning, laden with their dead and wounded. Machine-gun bullets were still taking toll, although the fire had slackened considerably. There was the risk that some of the

Zaghamedians passing that way would stop to remove the ones who had so recently been Tomayn's and Tommy's captors. In that event Tomayn's desperate courage would have been in vain.

At length, the tumult having entirely ceased, Tommy took courage and emerged from his hiding-place. He looked up into the sky. In the light of the risen moon he could discern the French airship slowly moving in a southerly direction with the *Explorer* following about two hundred yards astern.

For a moment panic gripped him. If the airships were leaving he would be abandoned with the badly wounded scientist upon the inhospitable plateau.

Then he spotted the *Vorwärts* barely half a mile away. She was still moored, although she too might soar at any moment.

Tommy's first instinct was to run to the German airship and obtain assistance. Then it occurred to him that while he was hiding under the Zaghamedian's shield Tomayn might be bleeding to death. He must bind up his wound. In any case, an attempt to reach the *Vorwärts* would result in delay. He might even encounter lucky parties of the hostile natives.

Groping for one of the daggers, Tommy set to work to cut bandages from Tomayn's already badly rent shirt. Then he proceeded to bind the ugly gash in his rescuer's arm.

As he did so Tomayn opened his eyes.

"Hello, my lad!" he exclaimed dazedly. "Brekker ready, eh?"

"It will be soon, sir," answered the lad, realizing the need to humour the wounded man. "Can you get up?"

For some moments Tomayn lay gazing up at the stars. Gradually he collected his thoughts and with them came increasing sensations of pain.

"All clear?" he asked.

"I think so, sir."

"Then help me up. What's that over there?"

"The German airship," replied Tommy.

"That's our goal," continued the wounded man. "Hand me that spear: quick, now. I can't hold up much longer."

Using the haft as a support, and leaning heavily on the boy's shoulder, Tomayn commenced his pilgrimage of pain. Every halting step caused him agony. Although weak from loss of blood, sweat poured from him. His head was whirling. But for young Smith's guidance he would have lost all idea of direction.

Still retaining the Zaghamedian's dagger Tommy piloted his rescuer, avoiding silent dark shapes that once were human beings. Some of them were that still, and, in consequence, more to be avoided.

Once a wounded warrior sat up, fumbling for his spear. But the sight of two white forms moving jerkily over the scene of the conflict aroused his superstitious fears: these forms could only be the evil spirits that haunted the battlefield in order to hinder the fallen warriors from being transported to the Zaghamedian equivalent of Valhalla.

Shrieking, he fled, to Tommy's unbounded relief. Tomayn was past caring.

Foot by foot, often deviating from the direct path, the lad helped his almost helpless rescuer on his way, until at length a guttural voice rang out:

"*Wer da?*"

Silhouetted against the glare was a German, armed, curiously enough, with a rifle and bayonet. Not knowing German, but guessing the meaning of the challenge, Tommy stopped.

"Friends!" he shouted in reply.

The man ordered arms and called the others standing by the moored airship. They came running towards the two who had come back from the gates of Death.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### The Return

It was midnight. Three thousand feet above the plateau the *Explorer* was just holding her own against a steady northerly breeze. Even with two propellers out of action and with a gaping wound in her side she could have made headway; but this was not her young Commander's intention.

She was "standing by" awaiting a wireless message from head-quarters.

Less than a mile away the *Jeanne d'Arc* was also just forging ahead. The *Vorwärts* could be seen still tethered to the ground.

"Why isn't von Müller ascending?" asked Mackie. "There's nothing to keep him there, is there?"

Peter shook his head listlessly. The loss of two members of the expedition still weighed heavily upon his mind.

"Well, we've got a task in front of us," continued Hugh, anxious to divert his chum's thoughts to other channels. "We can make temporary repairs, of course, but the old *Explorer* will be out of commission for some time when we do get home. Fortunately she's insured."

"She isn't," contradicted Peter.

"Surely?"

"Not against civil commotion," continued Preston. "Technically the Zaghamedians are British subjects. The insurance people, only too smart at any sort of excuse, will claim that the damage was due to that. And in a way they're right. Hello! The *Vorwärts* is getting a move on!"

The German airship was ascending mainly by the buoyancy imparted by the gas in her balloonets and assisted by an occasional "flick" with her propellers in order to counteract leeway.

Preston was still watching the *Vorwärts* as she climbed steadily when a light flashed several times in quick succession from her for'ard cabin.

"Signalman!" he exclaimed. "There's a message coming through from *Vorwärts*. Acknowledge and stand by."

Just then Dyson entered with a lengthy code signal.

"Complete message, sir," reported the wireless operator.

"Very good," replied Peter, "I'll decode and let you have a reply, if one is needed, as soon as I can."

Like a hungry dog with a bone, Peter hurried with the reply to his cabin. The German's message could wait, he decided. No doubt it was merely asking what damage the *Explorer* had received in the encounter.

Propping the written signal on his desk, Preston set to work, rapidly turning over the pages of the code book in order to translate the seemingly unintelligible jumble of letters into coherency.

"Approve of your action," read the message. "Have

communicated with Foreign Office. You are to return forthwith. Similar instructions are being sent *Jeanne d'Arc* and *Vorwärts* by the French and German Governments. Starlight. Message ends."

"Ordered off the field, by Jove!" thought Peter. "We'd have to go in any case now; but how will de Nonancourt and von Müller take it? They'll smell a rat and blame me. After all, they'll be right if they do. I wonder if the *Vorwärts'* signal has anything to do with it?"

Preston was in the act of locking away the confidential code book when there was a violent knock on the cabin door. Then, without waiting for permission, Mackie pushed open the sliding door and rushed in.

"They've got them both!" he declared excitedly.

"They? Them?"

"Yes; Tomayn and young Smith. They are on board the *Vorwärts*."

"Alive?"

"Yes!"

"Cheers!"

"But they are both knocked about a bit, I understand. Von Müller wants us to descend to tranship the pair, and apparently, although our signalman made a bit of a hash when he took in the message, which is in German, he's asking the *Jeanne d'Arc* to return the men they borrowed from him."

Peter glanced at his chum. For the first time since the commencement of the fight the young Commander smiled.

"What's your idea of the meaning of the word 'forthwith', old son?" he asked.

"Immediately or without delay."

"So I believe," continued Peter. "Then I'm going to disobey Captain Starlight's order for the first time, and, unless I'm mistaken, von Müller and the Frenchman won't carry out theirs at once. They've been ordered back and so have we."

"Good job, too," agreed Mackie.

It was not until after sunrise that the three airships came to earth. This time the *Jeanne d'Arc* and *Vorwärts* were again side by side, but the *Explorer* took up her position abeam of the latter.

The three commanders met on board the *Explorer*. There was no aloofness between the erstwhile rivals. What differences there had been had been forgotten in subsequent deeds of chivalry and mutual aid.

"I am proceeding as soon as I have recovered my men," announced von Müller.

"And there is nothing here to prevent our returning home," added de Nonancourt, loth to admit that the French Government had ordered him to return lest a "political situation" over the trivial boundary dispute might lead to appalling consequences.

"And we're off too, directly we have executed repairs," said Peter. "After last night I fancy the proper authorities are the people to deal with Zaghamedi."

A little later, after von Müller had returned, young Tommy Smith arrived on board the *Explorer*.

"They're bringing Mr. Tomayn along in a minute or so, sir," he reported.

"What happened?" asked Preston.

The lad told him the plain unvarnished story of Tomayn's desperate and successful bid to rescue him from the clutches of the fierce Zaghamedians.

Just as he had finished a party of Germans approached bearing the hero of the hour on a stretcher.

Smartly de Nonancourt stood to attention and saluted. It was an act of homage to a brave man and one that Preston and Mackie simply had to imitate.

"He's still unconscious," remarked Preston, glancing at the pale heavily bandaged man. "By Jove, we've misunderstood him. He has pluck, if you like."

"He has," agreed Mackie. "And he's a naturalized Englishman," he added inconsequently.

The man on the stretcher stirred slightly.

"That's where you are wrong," he declared faintly, yet emphatically.

Twenty-four hours later the *Explorer* landed at the Khartum Air Station to complete repairs. Then she resumed her homeward flight.

It was while passing over the Mediterranean that the wounded scientist, who was making good progress towards recovery, called Peter and Hugh to the side of his cot.

"I must apologize for contradicting you," he began, "but I think I have some justification, although I freely admit that I laid myself open to adverse criticism. I

in no more Henry Tomayn than you are. He is, as you were informed, an alien, a naturalized Englishman, and an indifferent one at that. It was he who chartered the *Explorer* to make the trip to Zaghamedi; but, when he heard that von Müller was also bound there he backed out. Why? Because he had stolen documents and aerial maps from the German and was afraid to face him. Had von Müller recognized Tomayn as Tomenz of Bremen there would have been trouble.

"So Tomayn looked around for someone to impersonate him. He advertised for a Professor of Science. I replied, because, firstly, I was keen on travel, and secondly, I was hard up, very hard up in spite of the fact that I once held an important post at one of the universities. I stayed with Tomayn at his country house for a month studying his mannerisms, and even trying with fair success to assume his appearance. I even bluffed Captain Starlight. The rest you know. I've finished with Tomayn; my chief desire is to fade away, as it were, so I ask you both as a favour not to mention what I did."

"Your rescue of young Smith? Sir, it was a splendid piece of work. You must be proud of it."

"I am," admitted Tomayn's impersonator. "I never thought I was cut out for that sort of thing. Still, one never knows. But you'll promise?"

"We can't silence a crowd," remarked Peter. "The crews of three airships know, and the story has been told at Khartum. That's nothing to be ashamed about."

"Exactly," agreed the wounded man. "So after all Tomayn will shine in the reflected light of my little achievement. I grudge him that; but one must pay for one's deception, I suppose."

When at length the *Explorer*, battered but airworthy, arrived at her home base, Captain Starlight was amongst the earliest to welcome the first of his countrymen to set foot upon the inhospitable plateau of Zaghamedi and to return to tell the tale.

"You've done splendidly, you fellows!" he exclaimed, addressing Peter and Hugh. "You .. done all that was expected of you and more. You have found the key to the secret of the plateau."

"And precious little else, sir," said Preston. "The oil's no good; the inhabitants are bitterly hostile, although we can't blame them for t .."

"No, indeed," agreed Captain Starlight. "To attempt to force our will upon them, to civilize them, would be nothing short of a crime. I suggested that to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and he agrees with me (you two fellows are to dine with him early next week, mind!). So the question of the future of Zaghamedi will remain under consideration, I understand."

"Indefinitely, I hope," added Peter Preston. "Then there will still be The Secret of the Plateau."

